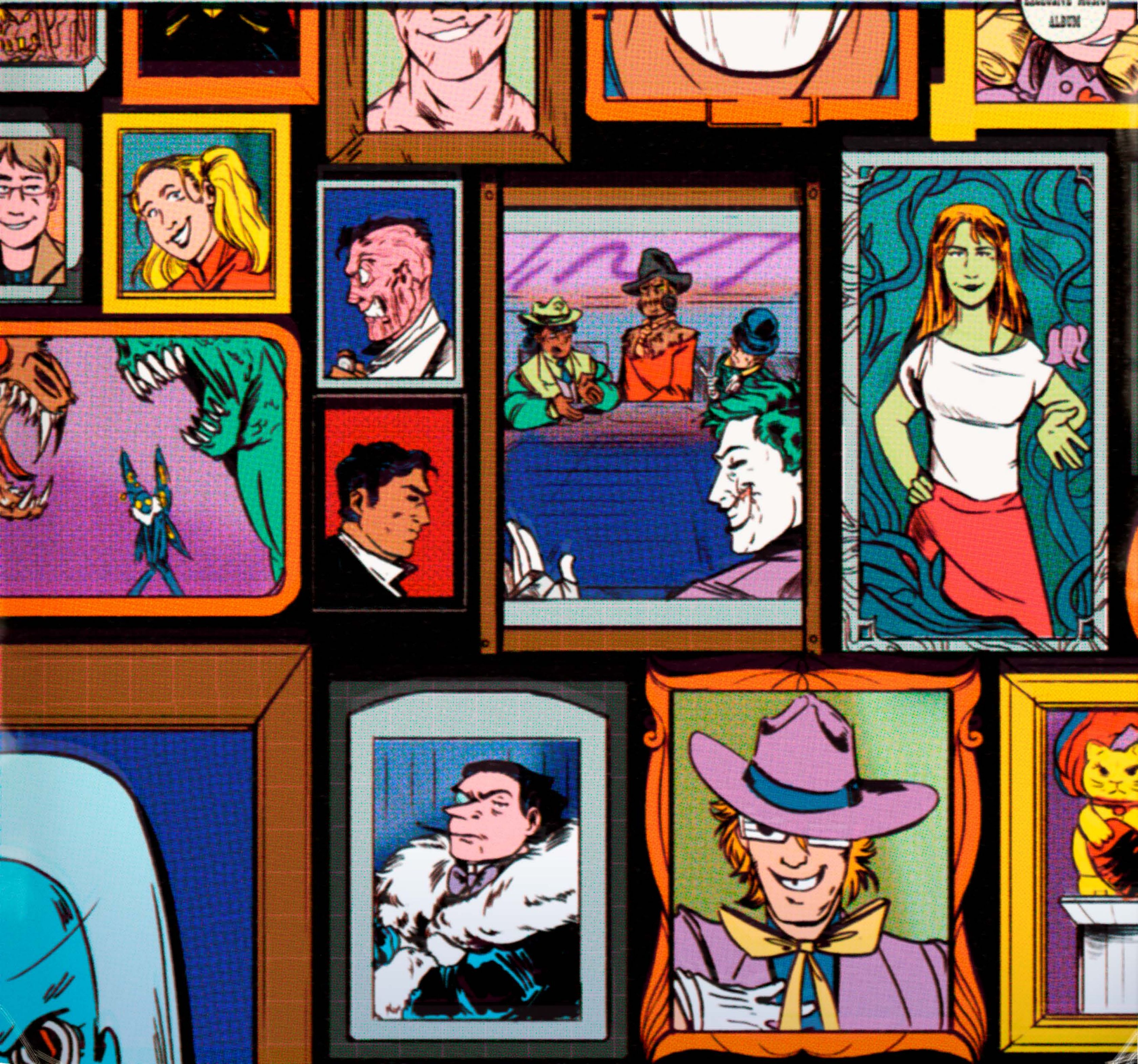
No. 1

Arkham Gallery
ZINE

INCLUDES EXCLUSIVE MUSIC ALBUM



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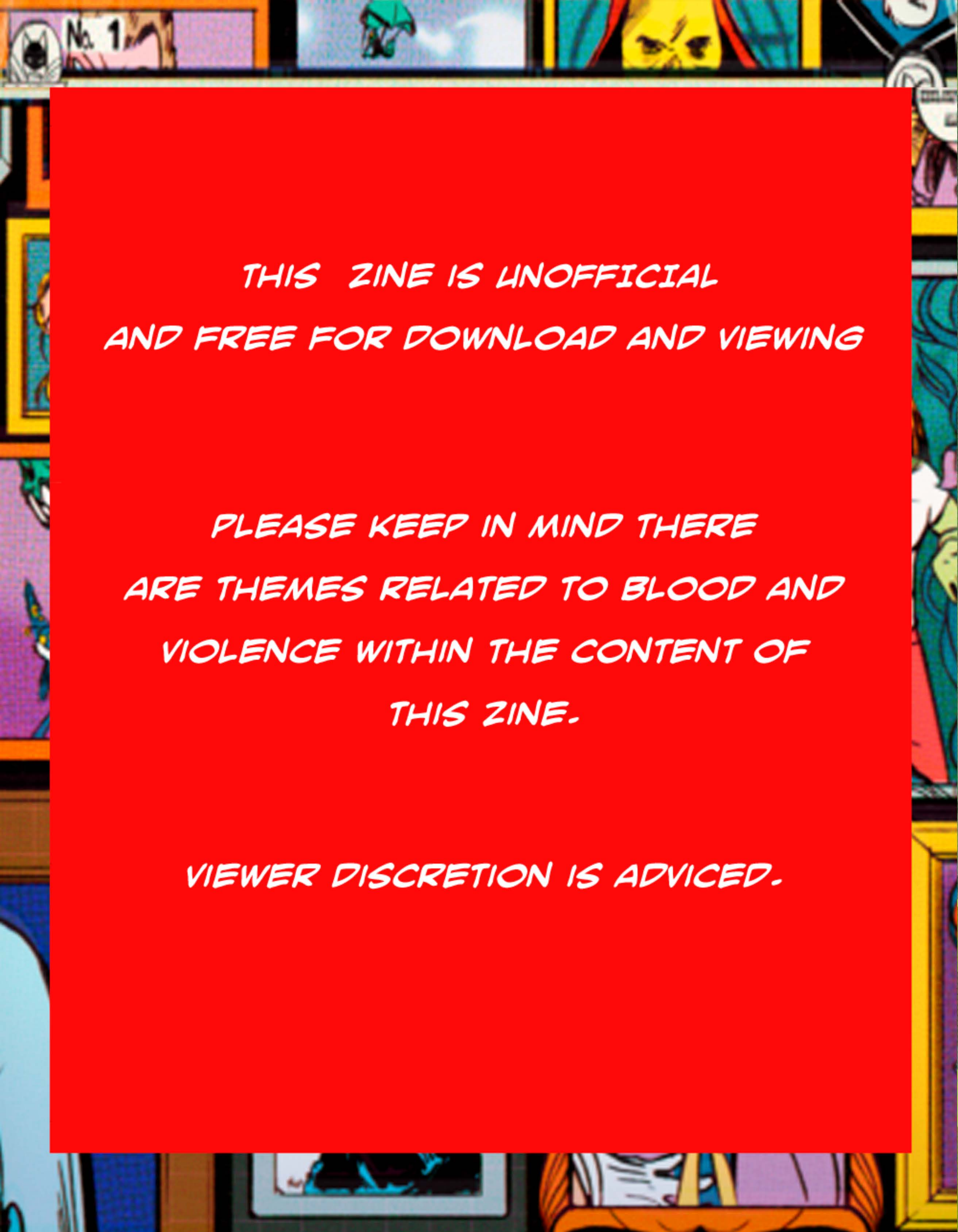

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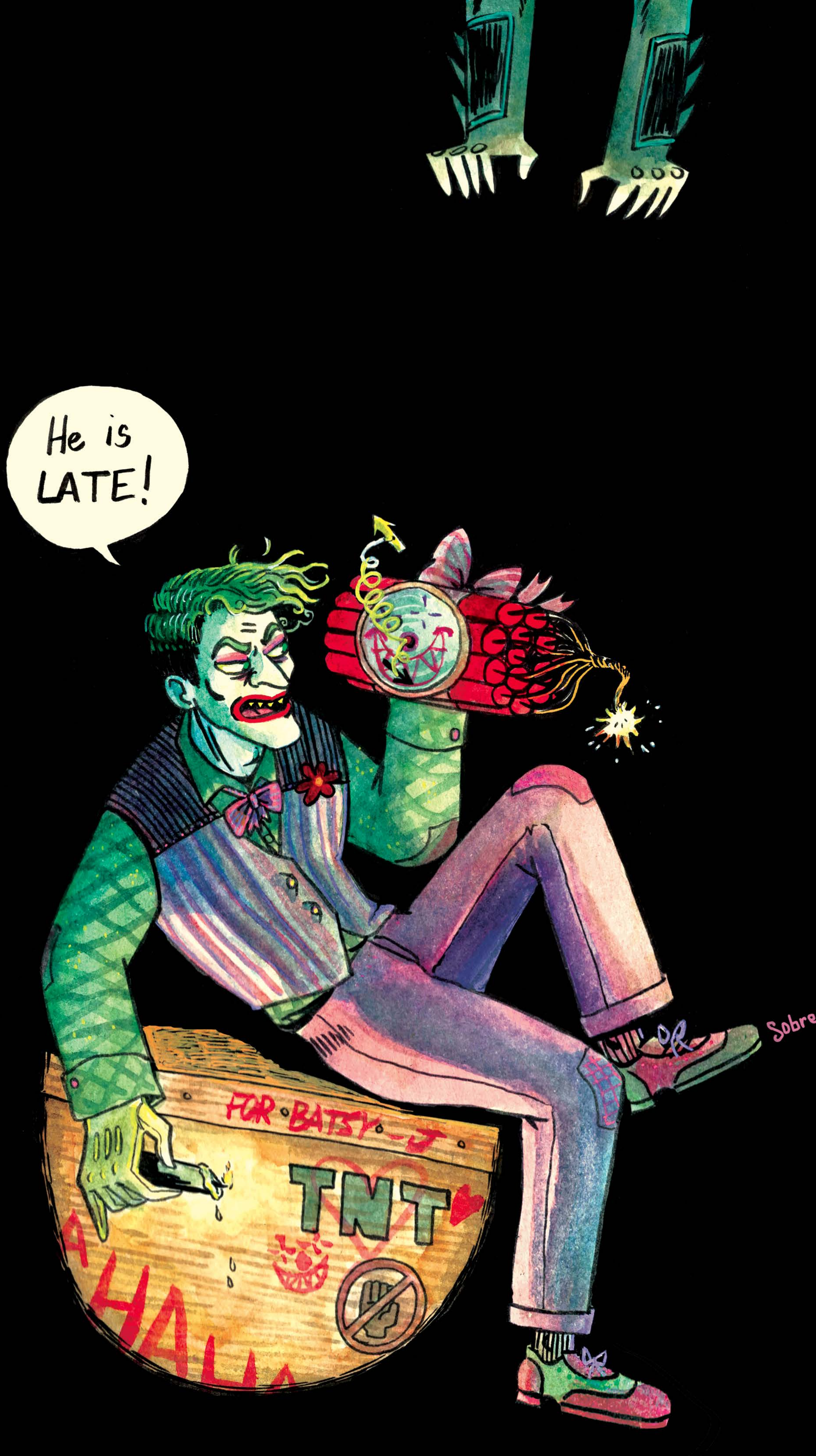
ILLUSTRATORS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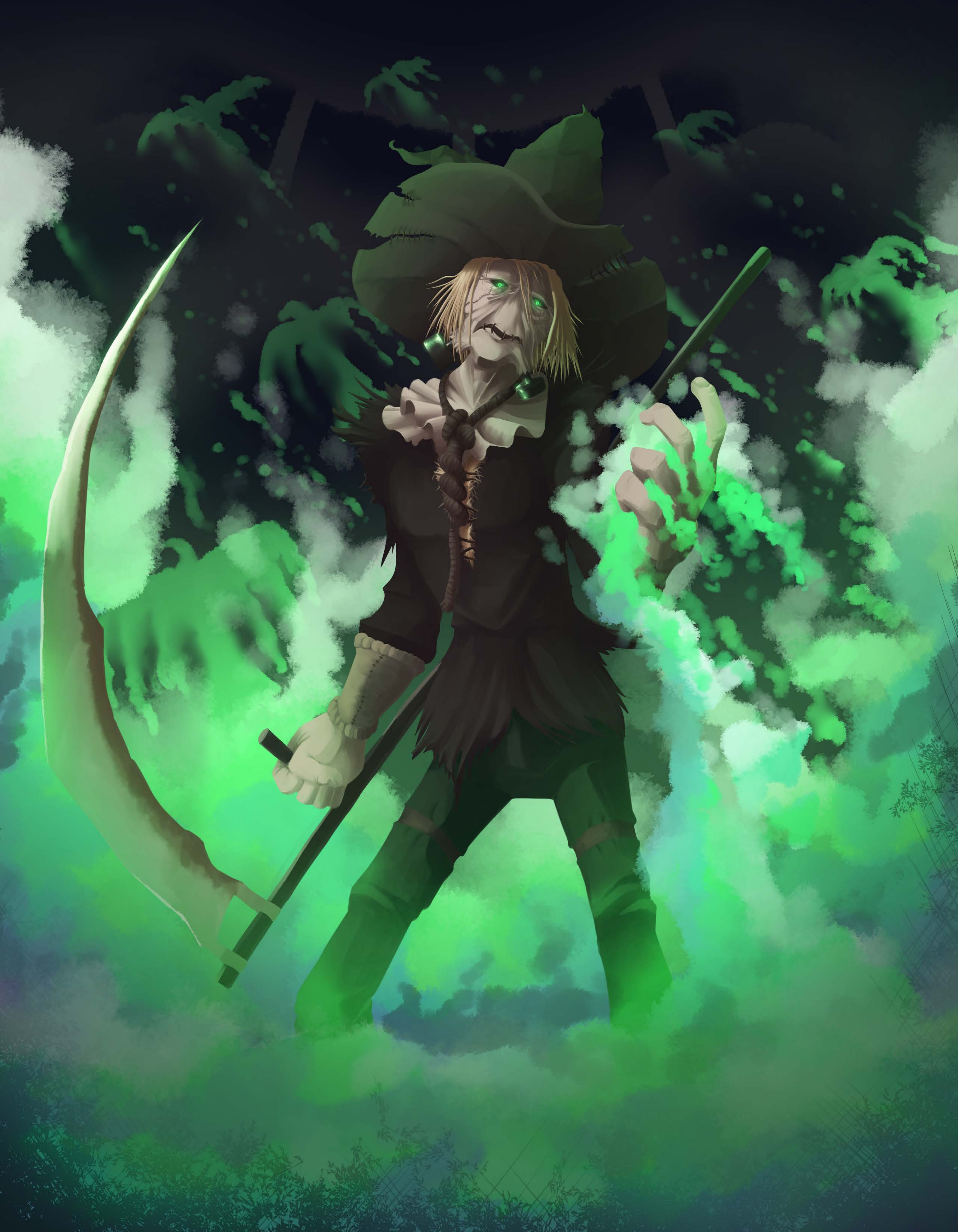

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KING
BiG Puzzles

EDWARD NIG
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RIVATE EY

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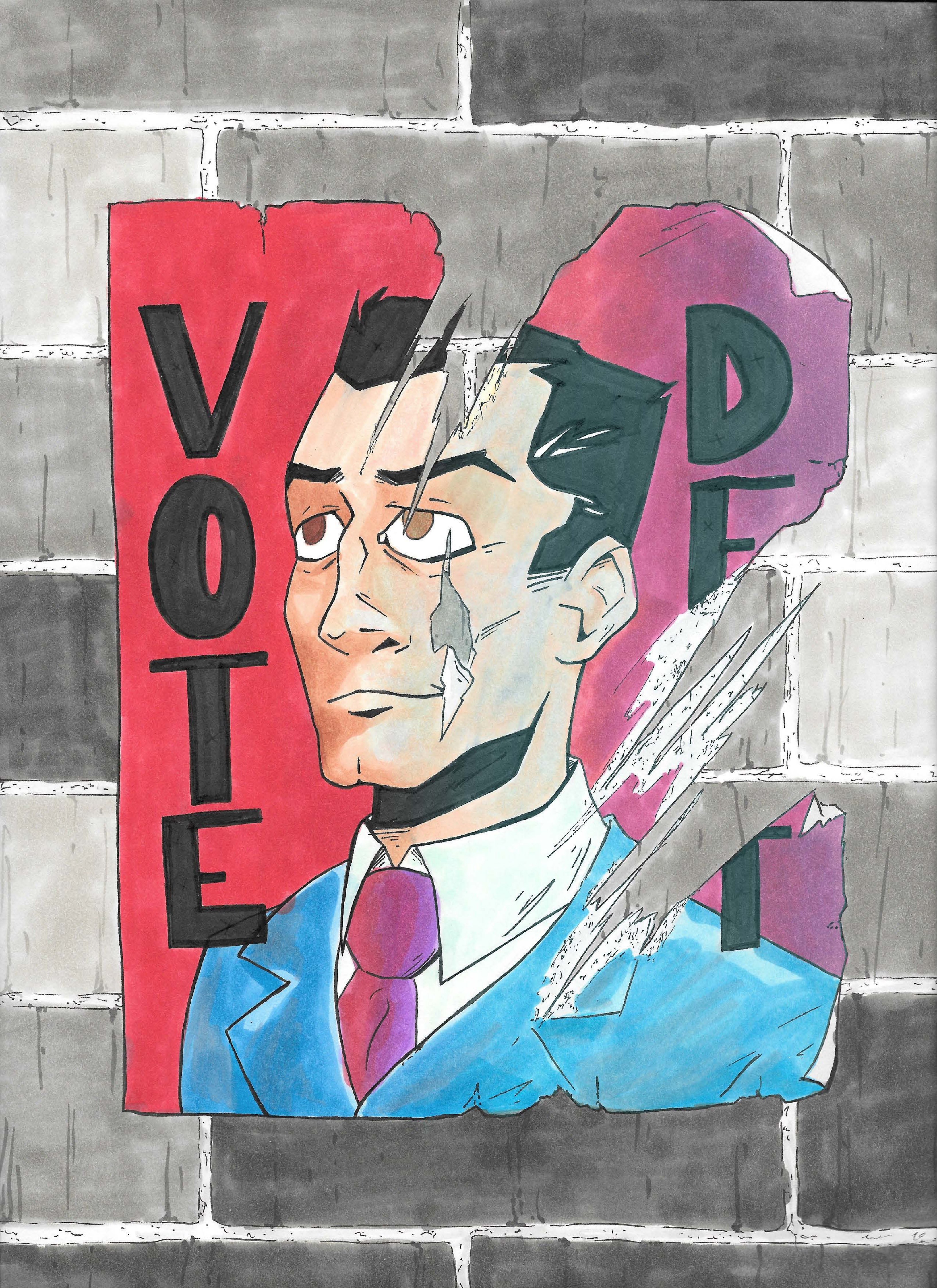
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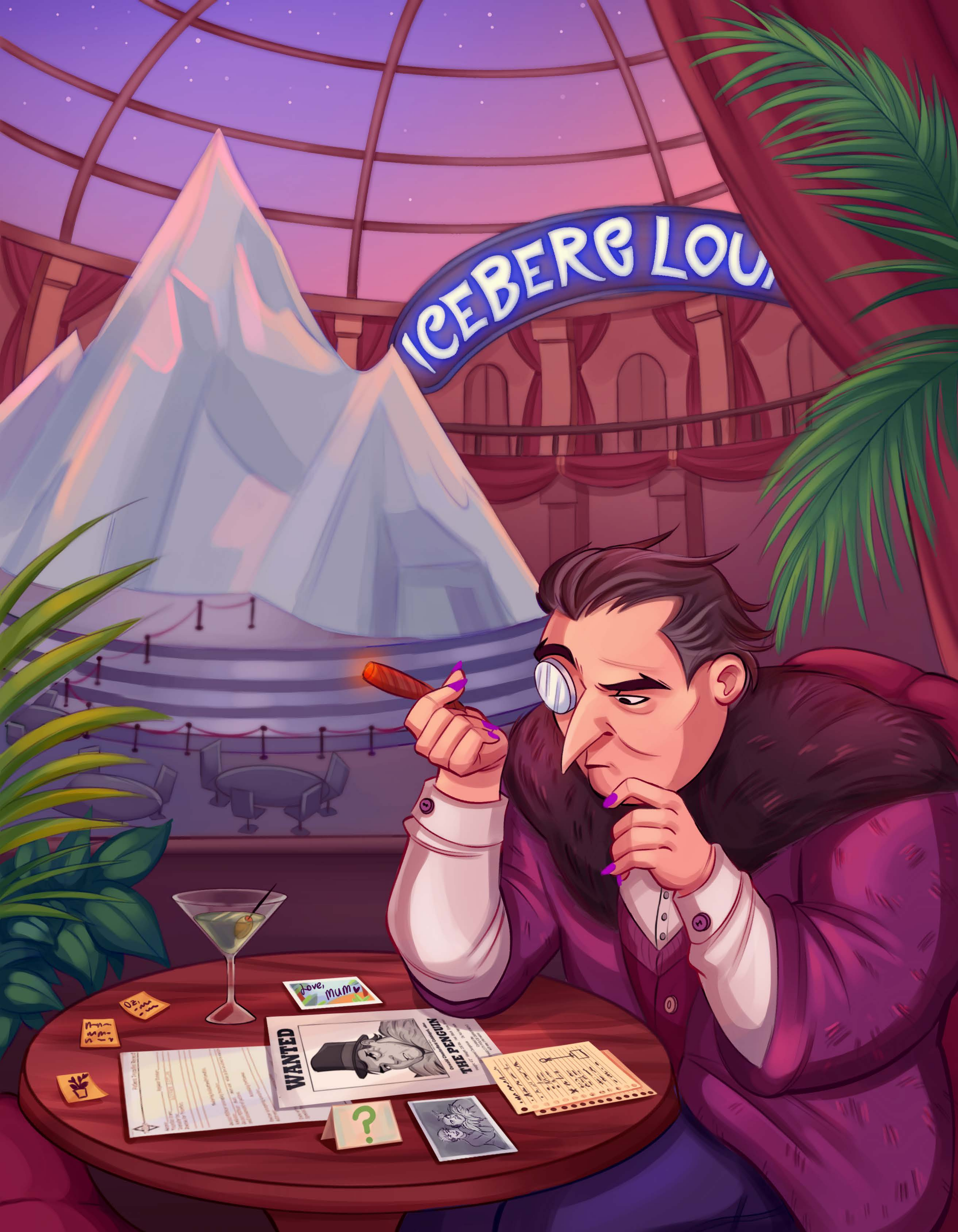
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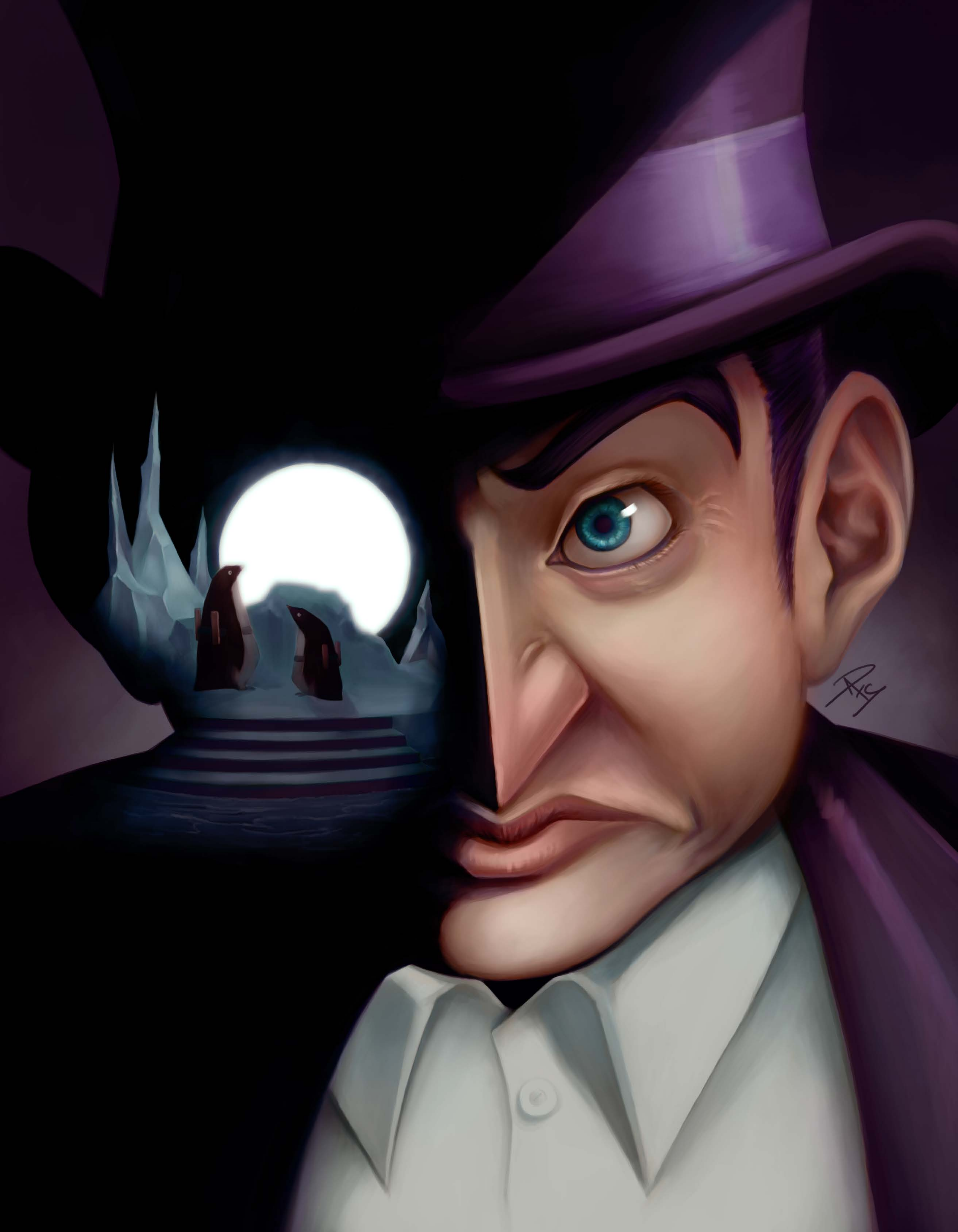

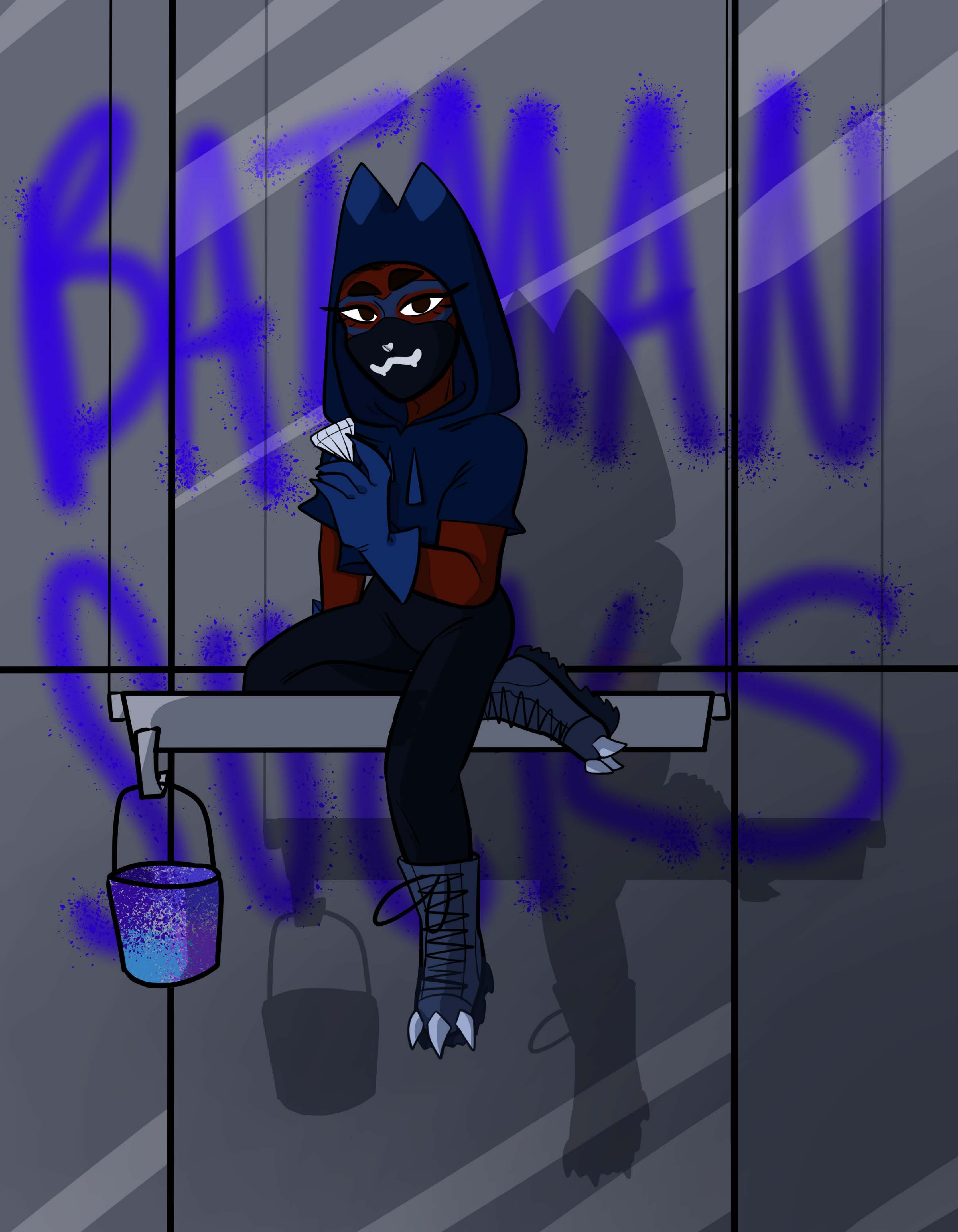
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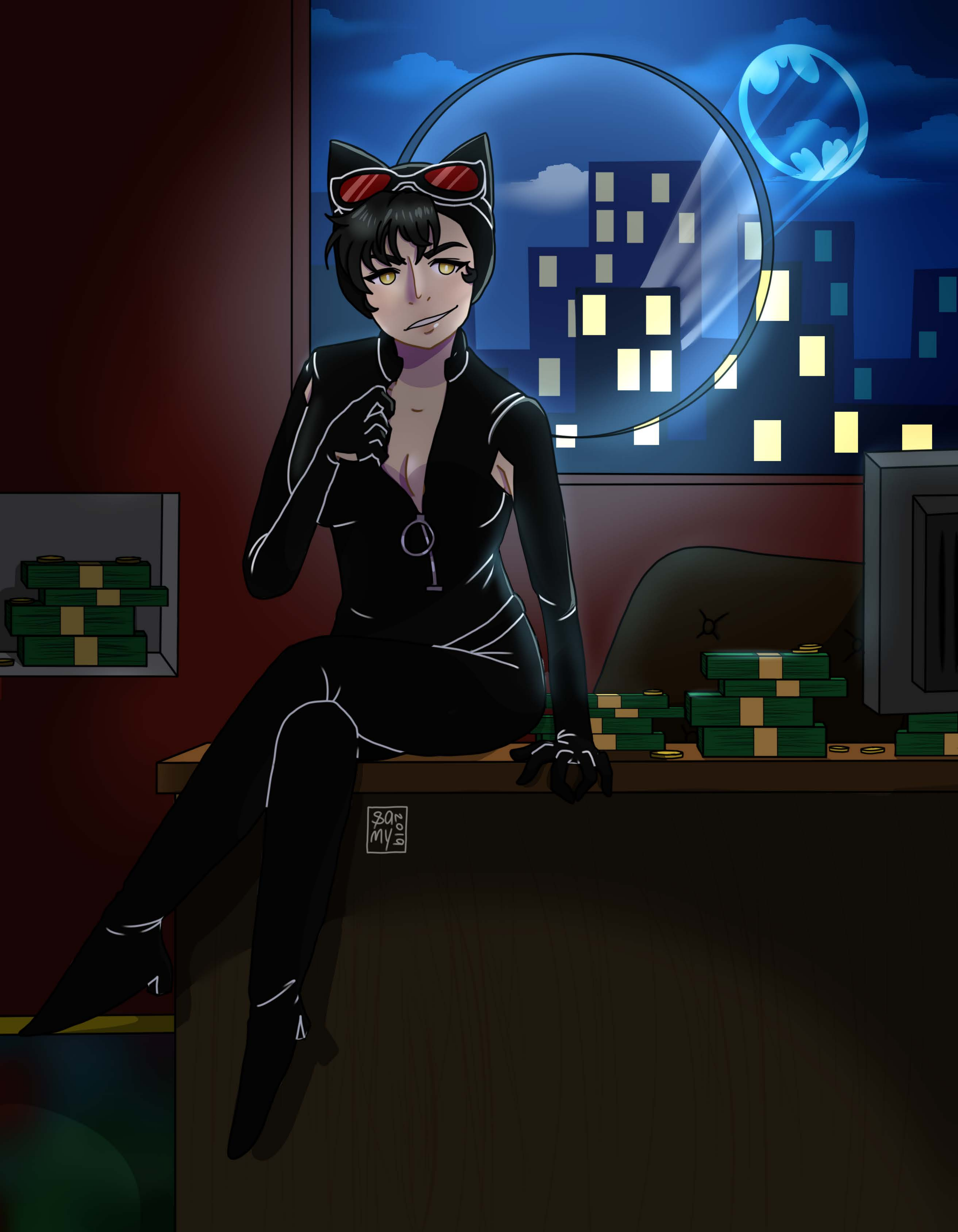
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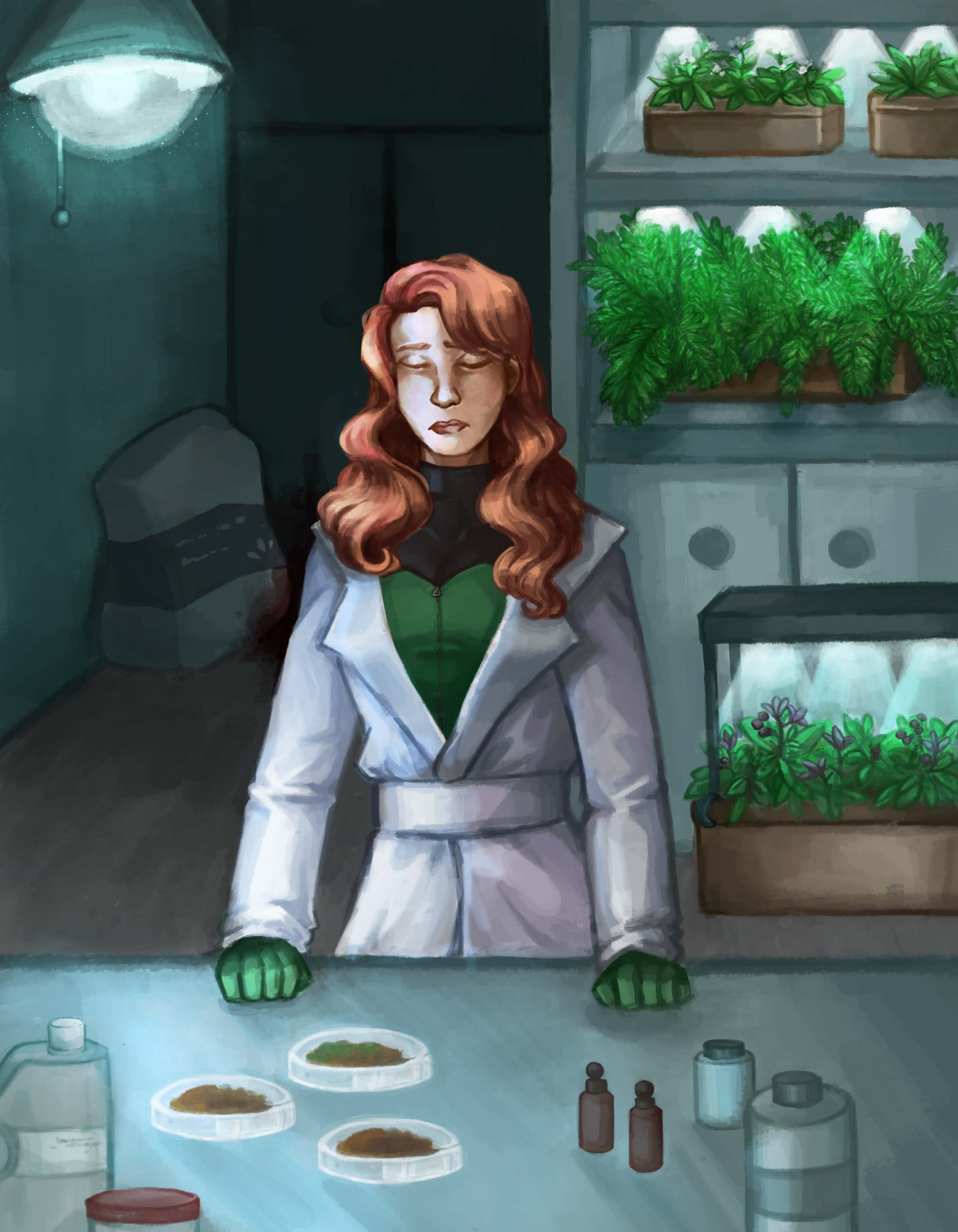

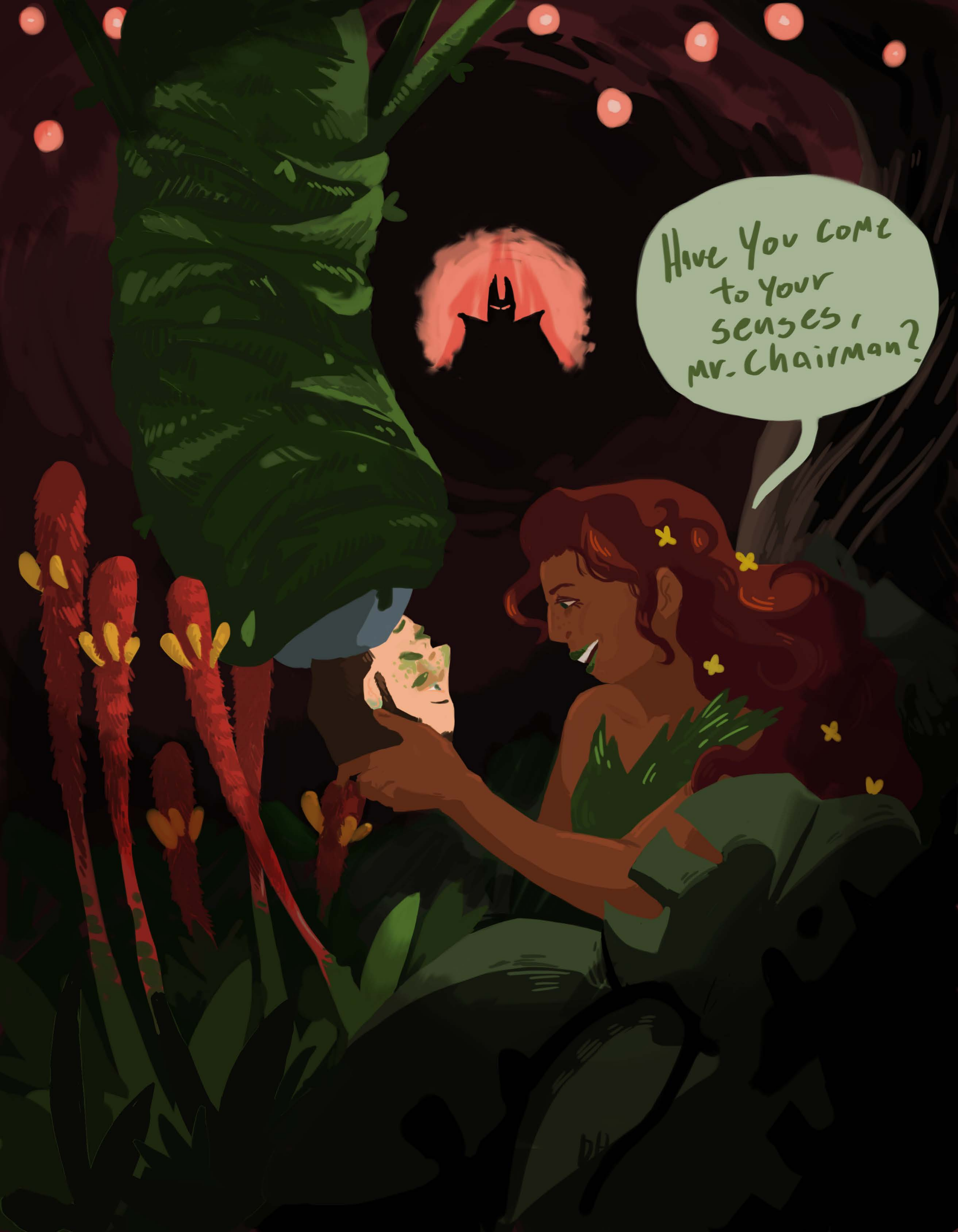
Hive You come to your senses, mr. Chairman?

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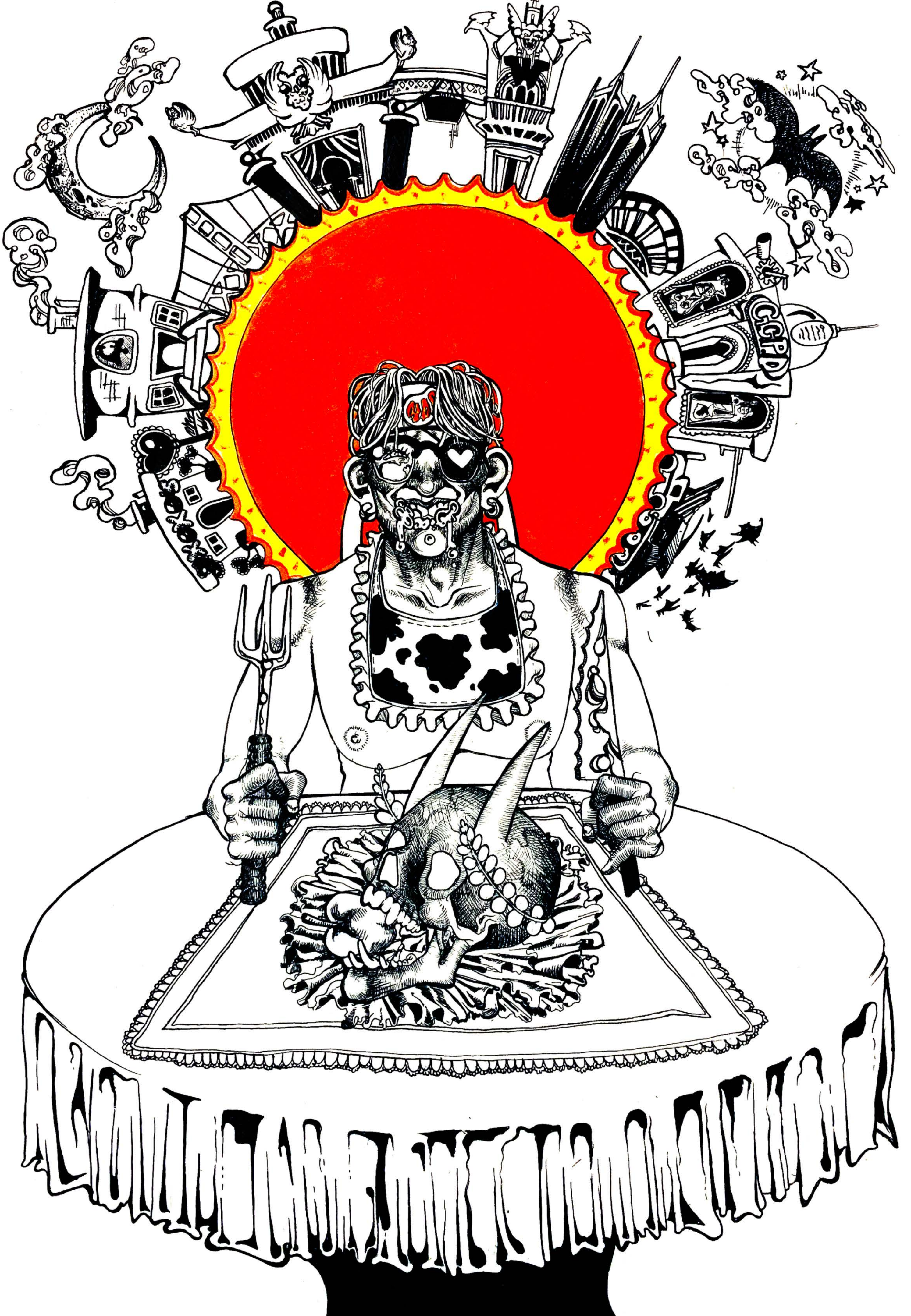

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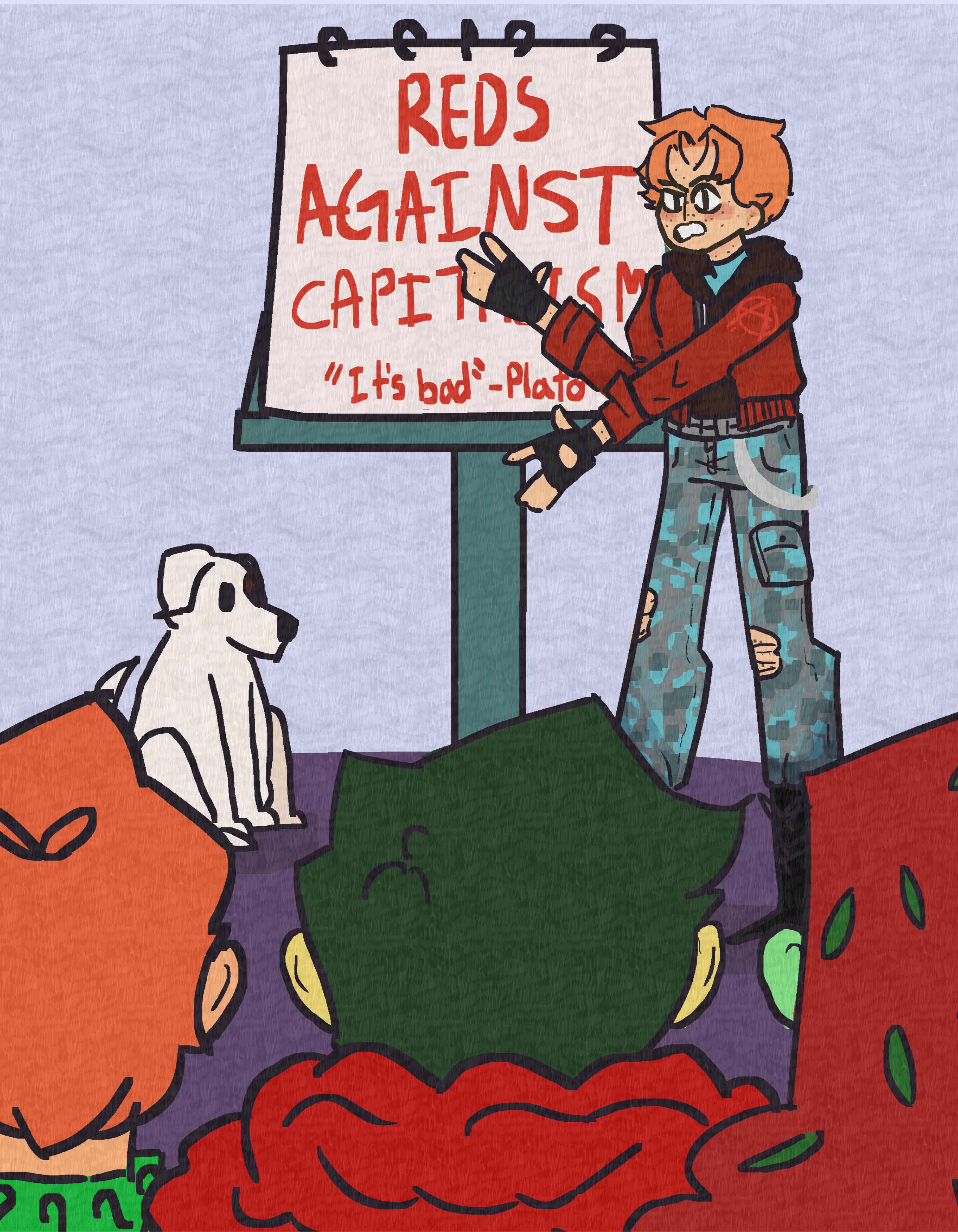
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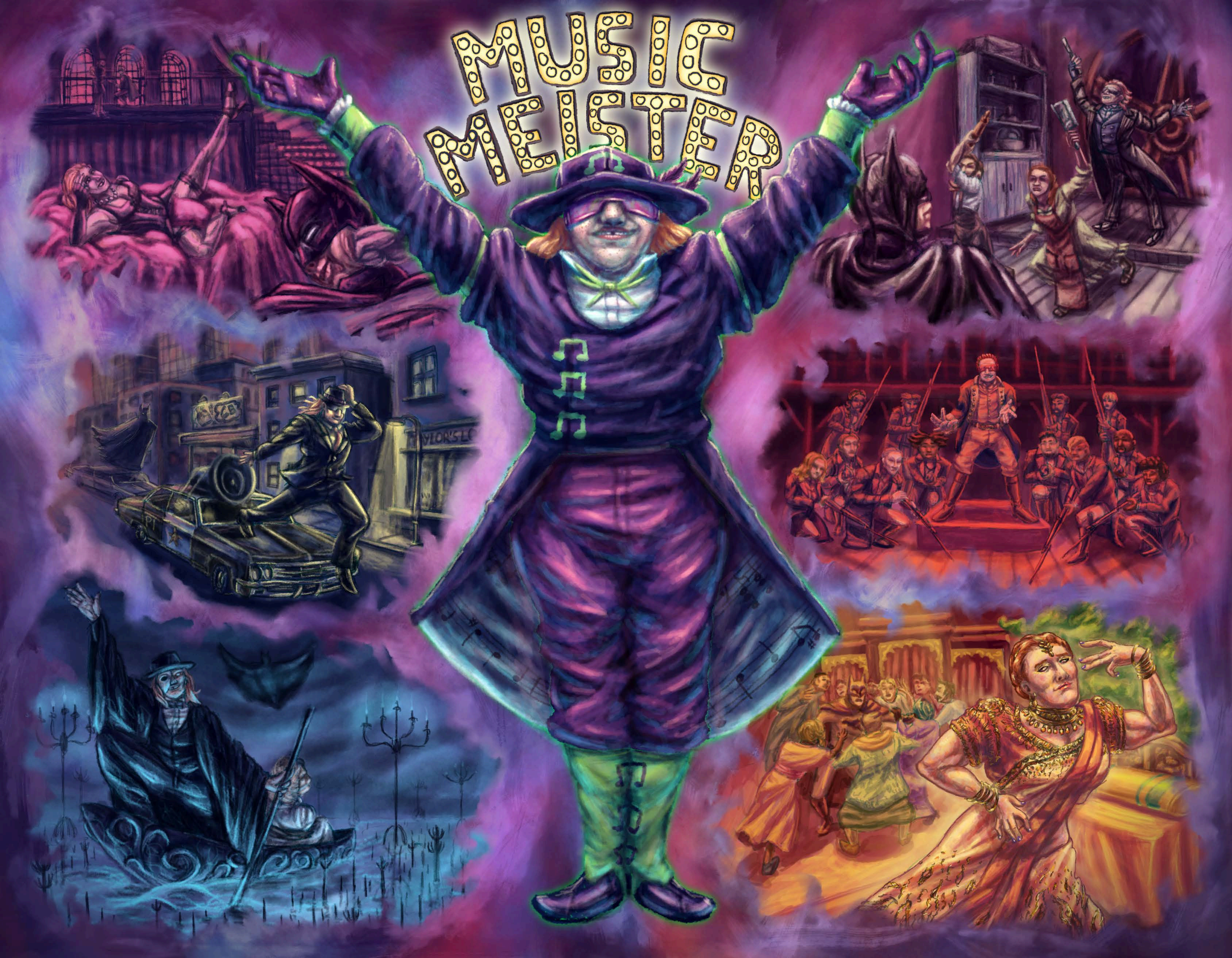
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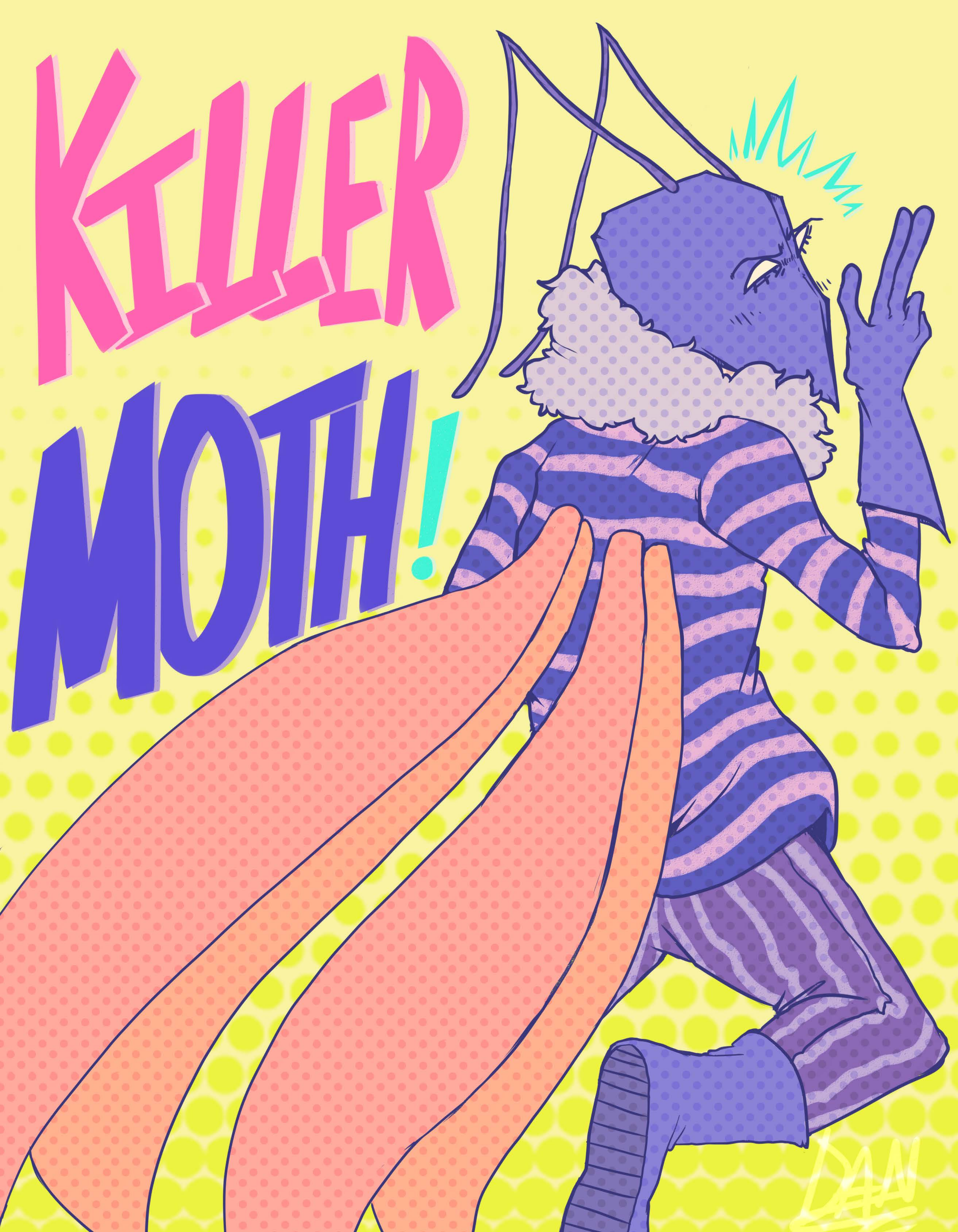
@ziphosura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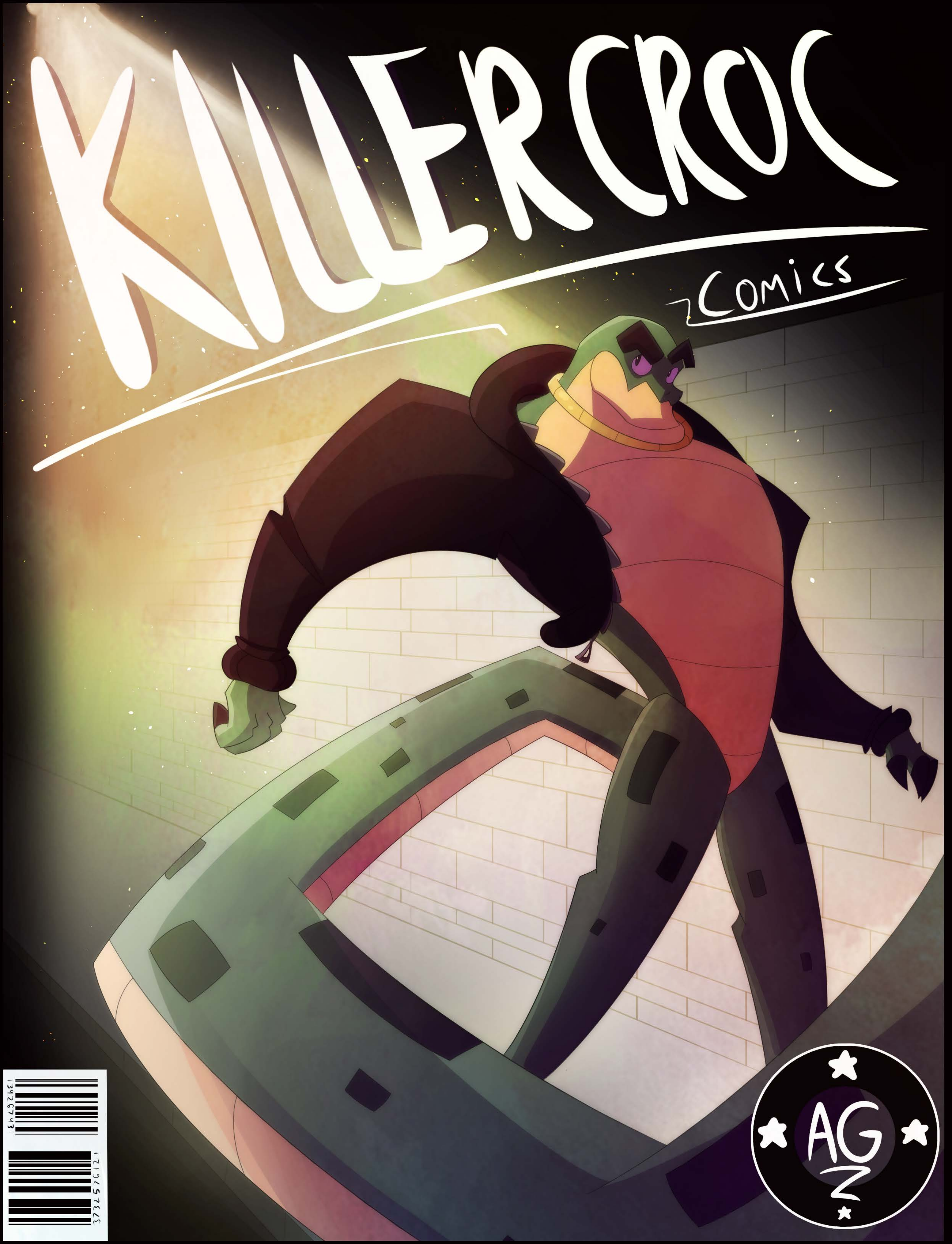
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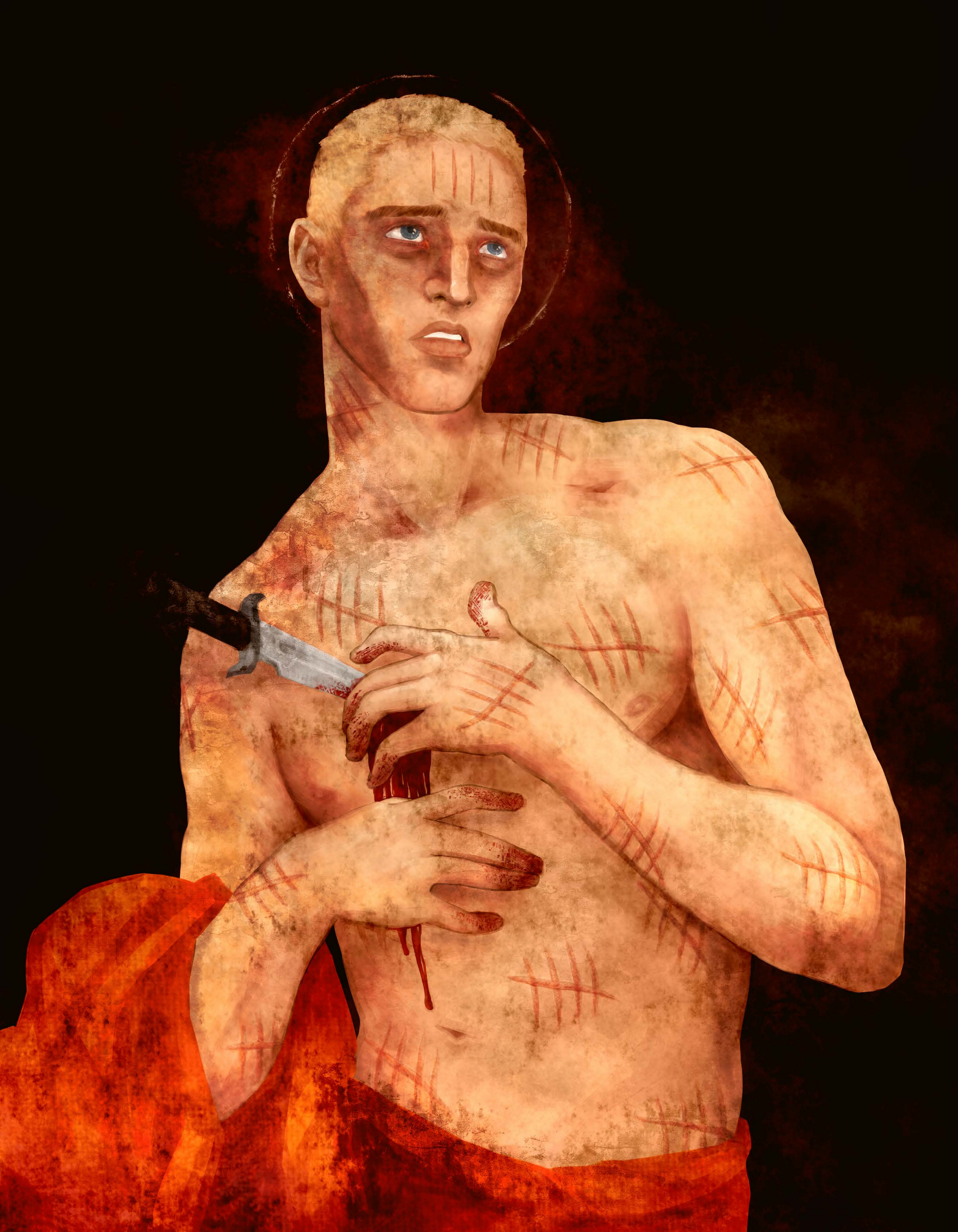

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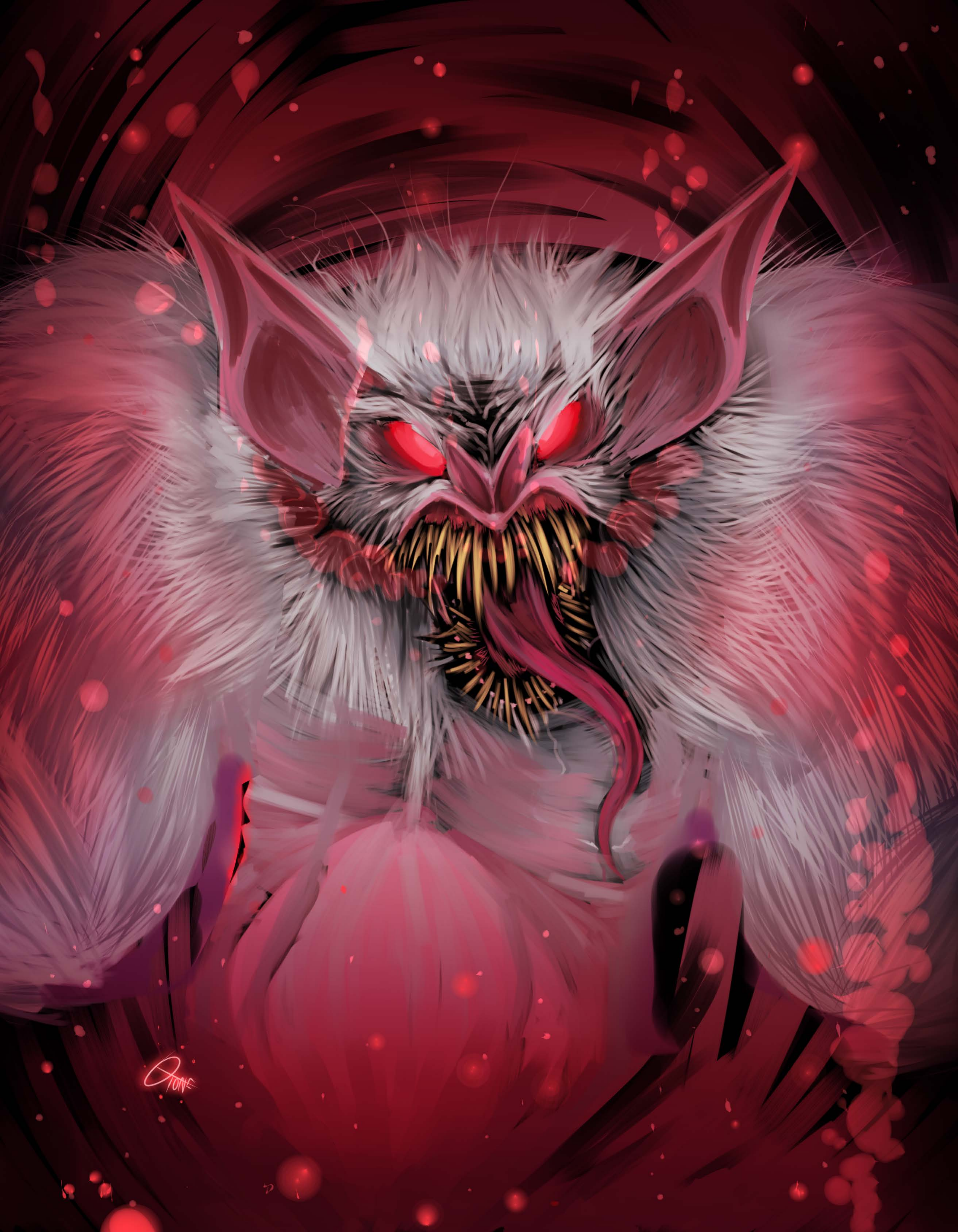
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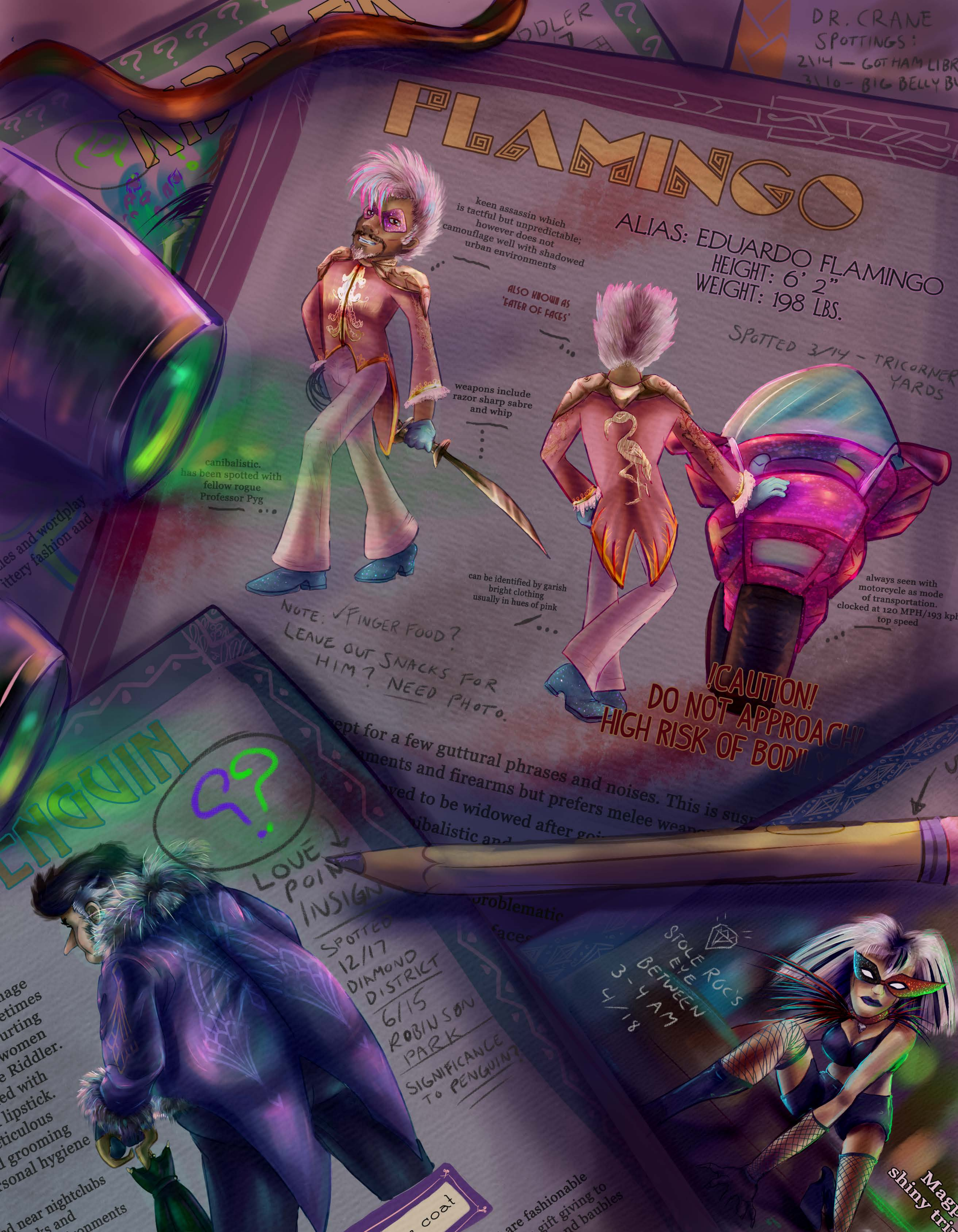
DR. CRANE
SPOTTINGS:
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ALIAS: EDUARDO FLAMINGO
HEIGHT: 6' 2"
WEIGHT: 198 LBS.
keen assassin which is tactful but unpredictable; however does not camouflage well with shadowed urban environments
ALSO KNOWN AS 'EATER OF FACES'
SPOTTED 3/14 – TRICORNER YARDS
weapons include razor sharp sabre and whip
canibalistic. has been spotted with fellow rogue Professor Pyg
can be identified by garish bright clothing usually in hues of pink
always seen with motorcycle as mode of transportation. clocked at 120 MPH/193 kph top speed
NOTE: √FINGER FOOD? LEAVE OUT SNACKS FOR HIM? NEED PHOTO.
!CAUTION! DO NOT APPROACH! HIGH RISK OF BODI
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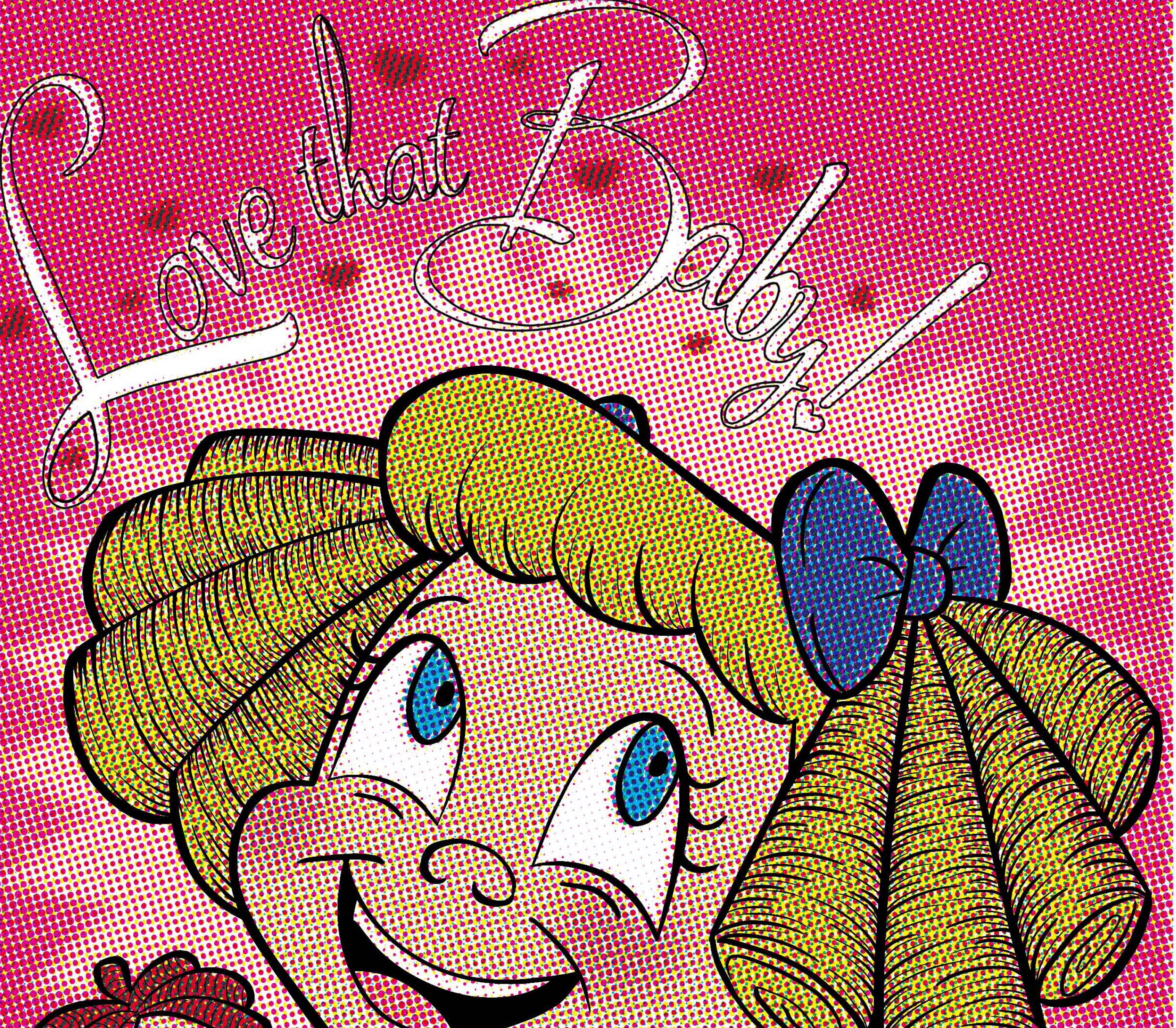
Love that Baby!

Weeknights on WGCN 7/8pm EST

N.FRIES
@ziphosura

MUSIC

MASTER OF FEAR

SONG LIST

1. THE MASTER OF FEAR
2. I AM FEAR
3. WHAT SCARES YOU THE MOST
4. GO TELL AUNT RHODY (COVER)
5. WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING (COVER)

WRITERS

The Late Night Show

By SioDymph

On the rare night when he was all alone, no henchpeople to boss, no rouges to annoy, no Bats to keep him busy and no new schemes brewing to ruin Gotham, Joker decided to treat himself to a clown's night in.

That meant going all out. Doing his nails watermelon pink and acid green. Ordering pizza with extra pineapple and anchovies. Making some drinks with the cute little umbrellas. And then settling down for the night with a nice movie. And by "nice movie" Joker meant watching any and all footage to ever feature himself.

First he laughed over some security recordings taken from his last big scheme. A month ago he'd set off a smoke bomb in the art museum, always a classic. It was a fun routine. He got to vandalize some over-priced garbage that was considered "high-end art". Adding some of his special Joker-touches to give them more color and pizazz. All while those yuppy, ritzy rich-types were stuck laughing on the floor, squirming at his feet. It had all been grand. That was, until Batman came crashing in and gave him the huge welt that still marred the left side of his face.

But who was he kidding? Fighting the Bat had been the best part! The fists! The fury! The way the two of them would do their violent dance. It always gave the joker a rush like no other. Plus it'd been hilarious when Batman ended up breaking one of those art pieces he was trying to save. He just backed right up into an allegedly-priceless vase and it shattered on the ground. The Bat had gotten such a guilty look on his face, now that had been truly priceless. It was worth the bruised face and bruised ego. It was so fun to Joker getting to watch the whole thing all over, getting to relive those funny memories.

That was, until he got to the part where he was getting arrested. He paused the video before it showed him getting carted off to Arkham in handcuffs. Being sent back was never funny.

He tried watching more security footage from his other "publicity stunts". Between the museum attacks, bank robberies, parade disturbances and TV-hijackings Joker had been a busy clown in the past year. Usually watching himself perform was a hoot. Comedy gold. But for some reason watching his old material just wasn't hitting that special spot it normally did.

That's when Joker got the brilliant idea to watch something a little more outta the box…

You see, over the years, Joker's had worn many faces and lived many different lifestyles. But across all the boards there were always 2 universal constants.

1. Joker loved himself. He loved his look, loved his jokes, loved his schemes. Loved practically everything about being the Clown Prince of Crime.

And 2. Joker was never one to follow rules. Not Gotham's. Not make-up or fashion's. Not even the laws of reality! He did what he wanted, regardless of what anyone or anything had to say about it.

So ignoring the laws of space and time and continuity, Joker decided to pull from his own extensive library. One that probably shouldn't have been able to exist but still did.

That was one of the nice things about being Joker. He was everywhere! Even in places where he didn't really exist, people still had stories about him. People just couldn't get enough of the clown! And over the years Joker had gained quiet a collection of "faces". Some felt real. Others simply felt like off-hand "interpretations" of himself. Parodies even. But each face, no matter how realistic or embellished, had an element of truth to it. After all, Joker was always one to make his origin story multiple-choice.

But what story would he indulge in?

Cesar Romero was always a classic, the man always held a special place in Joker's heart. Jack Nicholson wasn't bad either, both he and Mark Hamill really got Joker's style down. All zaniness and suave rolled into one. Heath Ledger was a little less camp and a lot more gritty, but even he did a nice job reveling in the clown-chaos.

He refused to watch Jared Leto though. That act had been down-right insulting! He made the mistake of watching that film once, and it was once too many!

When the mood suited him Joker would play the Arkham series games. But those video games could take a lot of time and Joker was feeling too restless for a six-hour binge. The same went for the Telltale series as well. Though more often than not, that series made him sad for reasons he'd never been able to put into exact words…

There were plenty of tv-shows and cartoons, but those felt too long for Joker to binge either. He was looking for something a little shorter, sweeter and to the point. He was ready to just re-watch the Batman Lego movie again when a new film caught his eye.

No Batman. No Robins. No Harley Quinn. No anybody.

Just *The Joker*.

A solo film.

A film exclusively all about him.

That idea alone was enough to win him over in an instant. Honestly, Joker was wondering why nobody had thought of it sooner! Based on Joaquin Phoenix’s look on the cover, Joker assumed this was another grit-over-camp version of himself, but Joker was too curious now to let that get in his way.

Excitedly he put on the DVD and waited to see what the film would be about.

Two hours later, Joker was just sitting on his couch. Dumbfounded. His pizza had gone cold and his drink went lukewarm, both abandoned at his side. All he could do was blankly watch as the credits rolled. Struggling to comprehend what he just saw.

He’d been so thrilled to see what this movie could be. To see how the universe saw him with this new face. To see what the joker was like without any Batmen, without any heroes or villains stealing his spot light. But Joker wasn’t so sure anymore.

He really didn’t like this new face…

Joker has always perceived himself as both a villain and an artist. A scary pale face hiding in Gotham’s dreams. A visionary performer. A ruling force in the hierarchy of villains. A comedic genius! And Joker assumed that’s how everyone else saw him too.

But this new face… Surely this wasn’t how people actually saw him nowadays. It couldn’t be…

This new face made him out to be this sad, sad little man. A lonely soul who took out his anger and disappointment out on the world.

The most insulting part though was the fact that he wasn’t even funny. All his jokes were awkward and fell flat. Even the one when he finally shot that stupid late night host, and that should have been the most hilarious joke of the movie! But instead of being humorous and satisfying, during the big scene the New Joker was just screaming and crying as he struggled to tell his joke. Where was the comedic timing? Where was the showmanship? This Joker was just pathetic. One of the most pathetic excuses of a clown he’d ever seen.

Plus there was this constant, weird undertone of him being this “unknowing poster-boy for change”. Some kinda “champion of the people”, which he didn’t care for at all. He’d always been an anarchist for fun, not for some popularity contest.

This couldn’t possibly be his latest face. It couldn’t be the new direction the universe was taking his image. It just couldn’t be…

When the credits finally ended and the TV screen went black that finally seemed to spark something in the Joker. He could feel a fire being lit, right behind his eyes turning everything red.

How dare they! How dare these people slosh together such slander! They didn’t know him, how dare they even try giving him such a pathetic excuse of a tragic backstory?!

Joker was many things, but a sad clown was never meant to be one. He refused to be seen that way and he refused for this to be his new image!

Running across his lair to his drawing boards, Joker unrolled his latest blueprints and got to work on his newest plan.

He’d show them all who the sad, unfunny, pathetic clowns were!

His new scheme was going to be big, dramatic, and gosh darn-it it was gonna be *funny*!

A day later, Joker found himself hijacking Gotham’s very own comedy talk-show: Late Night with Benji Bianchi. The former-host was tied up on his desk like a roast turkey in front of the cameras. Joker decided Mr. Bianchi was the perfect victim because he always had a bad habit of laughing at his own jokes, and to make matters worse his laugh was so *annoying*. Like a squawking bird. So Joker decided Mr. Big-Shot here ought to look the way he sounded!

The perfect cherry on top was the vat of tar and sack full of feather to add that finishing touch.

And anyone in the audience who tried to get in his way had a face full of laughing gas waiting for them.

At least that’s what the original plan had been…

While he was stringing Benji something odd happened.

Some guy in the audience started cheering him on.

“YEAH!” The guy hollered, punching an invisible ceiling above his head. “YOU SHOW’EM JOKER! SHOW’EM WE AIN’T A BUNCH A SHEEP!”

Joker was so flabbergasted, he stopped what he was doing and just looked at the man. “Excuse moi?”

The guy kept going, “WE’RE GOING WEREWOLF! AND WE LOSERS WON’T TAKE THIS CRAP ANYMORE!”

“I seriously have no idea what you’re going on about.”

That finally seemed to knock the wind out of the weirdo. He shook his head and continued with a defensive tone. “Well last week, Benji was saying how Gotham needed to put more regulation on construction. And here you are, showing him where he can shove his regulations!”

“What? No!” Joker said, shaking his head as if he could shake the words back out of his ears. “No! I’m not doing this for politics! I’m doing this cause Mr. Big Bird here always ruins his punchlines by laughing!”

“Isn’t that like calling the kettle black?” Benji Bianchi asked dryly, still stuck on the desk.

Joker glared down at the host, “You better watch it, Bye-Bye-Birdy! I still got a molten vat of goop with your name on it.”

“Got anymore bird-references? Or-or do you need a couple minutes to look up some more?” Benji asked, trying to sound sassy but there was a tremble in his voice that gave him away.

Joker had tried his best to sound threatening. But he was losing control of the room fast. Between anti-regulation-guy, the host trying to out-quip him and an audience starting to get fidgety things had begun to spiral. To make matters worse, a few more idiots were starting to join the first idiot in loudly protesting construction regulations. Like they were a part of some great protest and Joker was their leader.

This was quickly becoming a disaster. And not in the fun way.

But Joker was never one to give up easily. Grabbing a smoke bomb out of his coat he chucked it out into the audience. “You all are so bitter… and loud. Why not lighten up a bit? See the *funny* side of things!”

A beautiful glittery cloud of green spread over the audience. And quickly the sounds of people protesting and screaming and whining and crying all turned into the sweet sound of laughter.

“Now, that’s a lot better, don’t you think?” Joker grinned down at Benji. “I bet if you try hard enough you can pretend they’re laughing at something you just said. That’d be a first!”

Benji had been struggling not to breathe in the noxious fumes, but seeing the gloating look on Joker’s face he decided to risk breathing to say, “I’d say you could too, but I’m afraid that’d take way more imagination then you got.”

Joker backed up, disgusted and insulted by what the man said. And only moments saying his little comeback, Benji burst into such an obnoxious laugh, Joker questioned if it was really brought on by his bomb.

And that just sucked the fun out of everything.

He was so sick of everyone in that room, he didn’t even feel like waiting around for the Bat to come save the day.

Not even bothering to take the giant vat with him, Joker slung a bag of feathers over his shoulder and sulked away. The worst part was he couldn’t even enjoy the sounds of everyone laughing as he left. Cause Benji Bianchi was laughing the loudest of all.

In an annoying laugh that just grated in Joker’s ears.

Back in his lair Joker paced back and forth and back again.

What on earth was going on? Why were things going horribly all of a sudden? First that silly movie, and now this failure of a tv-take over!

He wanted to blame everything that happened on that one guy who’d started yelling. The one obsessed with werewolves and regulations or whatever. But Joker knew deep down he wasn’t the problem. The real problem was ol’Benji Bianchi. Joker had broken onto his show for the soul purpose of ruining the man’s reputation. And yet somehow, despite not being the one hog-tied to a table, Joker was the one that came out of it with a bruised ego.

What Joker didn’t get was how Benji had been so quick with the comebacks! They weren’t really jokes but they’d still stung. And they’d been distracting enough to throw Joker off his game.

Benji was the new target now. He represented everything wrong with comedy. Comedy was supposed to be jokes. It was supposed to be pranks and parodies. It was supposed to be situational, practical, multi-faceted sketches and shows!

Not just some guy laughing at all the mean things he says.

He just needed to give himself a little more time to plan.

Joker could admit that bad movie had riled him up. It made him dive right into a scheme without really planning out all the details. But this time! This time though, he’d give himself all the time he needed to really think of a good plan!

He’d get Benji Bianchi back! And he’d show Gotham he was no sad sap of a clown!

He just needed a little more time to come up with the perfect plan for sweet, thematically conclusive, cathartic revenge…

…

Two months later, Joker was still trying to figure out the perfect plan.

It seemed like no matter what he tried or what he did. Nothing seemed to be right. It was always too much. Too vague. Too random. Too simplistic. Too confusing. He could never hit that sweet spot.

Sighing, he let his head thud onto his desk. Nothing was working! Maybe he was over-thinking all of this.

At this point, he might as well just shoot the talk-show host in the head and call it a day…

Yeah, heh, that could be funny…

Joker chuckled a little to himself. All before his eyes widened and he realized what he had just thought of. He tugged at his hair as if his own head had just betrayed him.

“No, no, NO! I can’t believe I thought of copying that miserable excuse of a movie!”

Looking around he didn’t know what he wanted to do. He didn’t want to pace back and forth, he already did that enough to carve a track into the floorboards. He couldn’t even look at his desk of plans now after thinking of that last horrible idea, the whole area felt tainted. He couldn’t even take his mind of things and watch a movie cause that stupid film was what caused this all to happen in the first place!

That stupid film and about a stupid man who thought he could be a clown!

All at once, Joker got an idea. A last ditch effort to try and cancel out all the negative energy that had come into his life after watching that film!

Sprinting out his lair like his life depended on it, Joker leapt out the window, stumbled loudly down the fire escape, got into his car hiding in an alleyway and sped away.

He had to get an honest opinion.

When Benji stepped on set to get ready for his show, Joker was the last person he expected to see there.

And yet he was. Sitting on the set’s couch like he was an invited guest. But that wasn’t even the weirdest part. The weirdest thing was that Joker looked so serious. The clown wasn’t grinning, and his hands were clenching both armrests of the seat.

“I don’t remember having a Q&A with Gotham’s Most Wanted tonight.” Benji said. Trying to break the tension, he gave an awkward chuckle. “That’s not till next month.”

Joker rolled his eyes. But decided to say nothing.

“Look if this is about the stuff I said last time, it was nothing personal, alright? I was just nervous and trying to riff-”

Joker ignored what he was saying and cut him off with a raised hand. His tone had this fake politeness to it that was easily off-putting. “Benji-boy I need you to settle a bet for me, you think you can do that?”

Benji felt like he was walking into a trap. “Depends...”

“It’s a simple question really. All it takes is a yes or no.”

“Uh, can I ask why?”

Joker gave the man a raised eyebrow before getting up from his spot and slowly walking towards him. “Somehow, by some miracle you made it to the silver screen of late-night broadcast. You and that stupid laugh of yours. Now, whether you deserve it or not is beside the point. The real point here is you did it. Which means at least some tiny, measily, little part of your brain knows how to be funny.”

“Uh, thanks?” Benji said, beginning to back up.

“And I know you aren’t afraid of being mean to me so you’ll tell the truth.”

“The truth about what exactly?”

Joker kept walking closer and closer to the other man, until Benji couldn’t back up any further. Until they were nose-to-nose with one another. And Joker looked more serious than he had in his entire life. An unspeakable fire burning behind his eyes.

“*Do you think I’m funny?*”

Benji looked up dumbfounded. “Wait what?”

“Do. You. Think. I’m. Funny?”

“Are… Are you for real?”

“If you make me repeat myself one more time, I will kill you.”

That seemed to finally get to Benji. He stumbled back though there was nowhere left to go. “Ok, ok. I got it… Ummmm…”

Joker waited for the man’s answer, his face unreadable.

“Uhhhhhhh….”

“Be honest.” Joker said through clenched teeth.

Benji closed his eyes, he couldn’t stand how intensely the clown was staring at him.

“… Yes?”

For a moment Joker was silent. It was like the whole room had been paused. Benji waited for the Joker’s reaction.

Benji felt an arm swing around his shoulder. It took him a moment to realize he was being *hugged*. And before he could stop it Joker pulled him into a headlock and messed up his hair.

“Aw thanks, buddy!” Joker practically sang. Suddenly sounding so carefree. “I knew I could count on you!”

“Uh, your welcome?” Benji still had no idea what was going on.

But before he could do anything else, Joker let him go and began walking away.

“Take that Todd Phillips!” He shouted, letting the stage doors slam shut behind him.

Benji just sighed, sinking into his anchor chair.

“Man, I really gotta relocate to Central City…”

24 Hours in Arkham

by AcapellaDitty

Saturday 4:00am

Hindsight was a cruel mistress and as the doors of the asylum ground to a squeaky halt behind him, Crane mulled over the errors of the evening. He was an intelligent man but even he was not omnipotent, and the incompetence of others often plagued him. The silent alarm had been his downfall, a silent alarm which he had been guaranteed would be disarmed before his arrival at the office block. Money had exchanged hands for such a service, despite his limited resources, and as soon as he escaped this place, that money would be reclaimed with an additional pound of flesh for his troubles.

Recent difficulties with procuring a residence for the production and testing of his toxin had deprived him of the pleasure of a long-term test subject but, with a little persuasion, that would change soon. The very man he needed was held within these asylum walls and while he would have preferred to have this meeting in isolation, the asylum would suffice for now.

But that was an issue for later.

At the moment, he had more pressing matters.

For example, the broken wrist which he was subtly cradling against his thin chest, unwilling to show the pain which the throbbing joint was causing him as he steeled his expression into blank contempt, a gift from his captors for his crimes.

“Move, Crane.” A gruff voice behind his left ear demanded and the words were accompanied by a jostle which sent a burst of pain through his presumably bruised ribs.

“Brute.”

“You caused a lot of damage tonight, Crane. Some of those innocent people might never recover from the horrors you’ve inflicted on them.”

“Then it was you who failed to save them.” Unable to resist needling his tormentor, Crane hurled the accusation with venom and satisfaction flickered within his gut as the dark knight's lips set into a thin line.

Another push for his troubles and Crane bit at his inner lip to hold the grunt of pain at bay.

“Who do you have for me tonight then?” Standing behind the safety glass, the receptionist for the evening was a familiar sight for the eyes.

Miss Waters. Darlene to her friends. Husband deceased via heart failure; she had no children. No known phobias but has demonstrated an obvious aversion to blood on several occasions.

“Good evening, doctor.” She inclined her head in greeting to Crane and while he would usually be tempted to return her pleasantries, he was in no mood at the moment and his eyes briefly flicked to her in acknowledgement. Raising a brow at his silence, she continued to smile at him in a friendly manner. “I'm sure your usual cell is free; I'll make sure and say to guard Jones to put you in there.”

Crane had never truly worked out if her kindness with the inmates was borne of a defence mechanism to protect herself during riots and attempted escapes or if she truly did possess the level of empathy needed to care for monsters. Regardless, she had already outlasted four different wardens and did not seem to be going anywhere anytime soon. It was almost admirable. Even he, who possessed no great love for any creature of this earth, had to confess that he would be reluctant to kill her unless it proved necessary.

“Patients name is Jonathan Crane.” Miss Waters muttered to herself, scrawling the information down as she processed him. “Patient number 2193...”

“He'll need a doctor.” Batman interjected once her scribblings had some to an end.

“A doctor? Why?” Miss Waters could not hide the mild boredom in her tone as she cycled through her usual script and her gaze scanned Crane's body to seek out the injury, as she had many times before.

“Broken wrist.”

“Oh. Okay, and how was it broken?”

Batman gave her a pointed look.

“I need it for the paperwork. It's a new policy” She pointed down at her clipboard sheepishly. “Warden Sharp insists.”

“It was me.” Robin interjected. “A mad dog is normally put down so he's lucky I just snapped his wrist inste-”

“Robin.” The warning in the dark knight's tone was unmistakeable.

Following the admission from the bright yet scowling figure, a loud bark of laughter broke up the conversation and Crane turned in place just in time to catch the sight of Harvey Dent disappearing around the corner, flanked by two guards.

Shaking off the mild irritation, Crane returned to the conversation at hand.

“Okay, Batman. If you wait here, I’ll buzz for the guards to deliver him to his cell.” Turning to Crane, she continued. “Fresh clothing will be provided in your cell and I will alert the doctor to visit you as soon as possible. That okay, Doctor?”

Turning his head to the side, Crane answered her.

“Acceptable.”

“If you keep from scaring the guards as you settle in then i'll have the latest psychiatric journals left in the rec room for you tomorrow. They just came in yesterday and I know you do enjoy your little creature comfo-”

“Are we finished here?” Batman cut across her speech, looking thoroughly unimpressed with the courtesy which his prisoner was being afforded.

“Sure, hon.” An abrasive buzzing cut through the air as she alerted the guards to her needs. “They'll be here in a sec.”

Before any further jibes could be exchanged between himself and his captors, Crane found his arms being seized between two sets of hands as he was led through the familiar hallways of the asylum towards the high-security wing which would be his home for the foreseeable future. The bright lights above glared at him as he passed beneath, walking through the processing room without hesitation. There was no point in searching him as the Bat was known for being thorough in his captures. He had taken everything from the spare vials of toxin he kept sewn into the lining of his costume to the spare change which had been rattling around his pocket.

The toxin he could understand, as irritating as that was, but the money? That was a pettiness which he had noticed the Bat indulge in often enough for it to be a trait.

As Crane strode past the glass panelling of the other cells, he held his head high and did not steal any glances to assess which other rogues he would be keeping company with. That would be the focus of the morning once he had established himself. One of his guards coughed to break the silence as he held his pass against the security panel and waited for the door to unlock.

“Move, inmate.”

The guard on his left muttered and made a move to push him forward into the cell but a sharp glance caused him to falter. There were few guards who would dare to antagonist the Scarecrow, particularly when in full regalia, and Crane walked into the cell of his own accord.

“Your jumpsuit will come when facilities arrive in the morning.”

Crane did not acknowledge the comment and as the doors to his cell slid smoothly shut, a loud click echoed as the electromagnet locked the door into place.

Eyes sweeping across the room, Crane was disgusted by the familiarity of it. Miss Waters was correct in her assessment though; he did prefer this room to others.

The fluorescent white shade which everything in the asylum was coated in had dulled over time to something less offensive to the eye. The only other colour within the room being the black specks which made up the design of the linoleum on the floor and the frame of the cot.

It was a grim sight, uncomfortable in its uniformity and forced sterility, but he was accustomed to it.

Glancing to ensure he was not being watched, Crane dropped to his knees and slid his thin fingers along the linoleum of the floor until it hit upon a slight groove. Slipping a finger within the groove, he pulled back the flooring there to expose the wood below and, with a deft hand, he lifted the broken piece of wood and slid his hand into the small space. Feeling the edges of a plastic bag he lifted it free and examined it.

Perfectly untouched.

Opening the bag, he was met with the sight of his stash of notebooks and writing utensils which had been created and cultivated over the long periods which he had spent within the asylum. Months of smuggling and bargaining, all held within a flimsy plastic bag.

Pleased with the haul, he extracted the bag and slipped it under his cot away from any prying eyes.

Cell inspections were never conducted in Arkham while the cell was occupied. It was never worth the hassle it created.

Satisfied with all he had found Crane took a moment to stretch out his aching muscles, wincing as a ‘pop’ in his shoulder brought intense pain followed by a shaky relief. He had evaded the Bat for a respectable amount of time, but his thin frame had taken several hits from the environment as he attempted escape.

Taking a resentful look at the uncomfortable cot which he was stuck with, two inches too short to fit his long frame, he dropped into it with little grace and as his head hit the thin pillow, he was quick to fall into fitful sleep.

Saturday Morning 8:00

When it came to awaking in Arkham there were only two options, either you found yourself dragged from sleep by a foolish guard on a power trip, or you were jerked into consciousness by the fresh hell which was the natural ambience of the asylum.

Today Crane was treated to the latter.

He was unsure who was screaming in rage just down the hallway from his cell but he immediately came to the decision that if he came across them over the course of the day, he was going to make a conscious effort to snap their neck for ripping him from blessed unconsciousness. However, before he could allow his thoughts to fester, he took note of the jumpsuit which had been delivered to his cell at some point during the night.

“Great.” His voice sounded hoarse even to his own ears, and he rubbed at the column of his throat as he vacated the cot.

Grunting, he bent over to snatch the jumpsuit up from the floor and disappeared behind the segmented area of the cell which gave inmates privacy to use the bathroom. Changing quickly, he carefully removed his blood-flecked clothing from his body with some satisfaction as he pulled the jumpsuit up his legs and slipped his arms inside. Popping it into place, he was amused to find that they had managed to find one which did not leave inches of his wrists and ankles exposed. Zips had been barred from all clothing several years previously after Joker had successfully removed the zipping from his jumpsuit, filed the edges down, and used the newly created weapon to almost decapitate one of the guards in a show of unbridled brutality.

His musings were cut short by the appearance of a guard at his cell door.

“Breakfast time, inmate.”

x-x-x-x-x

Breakfast was uneventful.

Porridge was the foodstuff deemed most suitable to meet the needs of all in terms of both nutrition and, Crane suspected, price. Therefore, it was the only breakfast option. Customisation, when allowed, was limited to the choice of one small sachet of sugar or salt for additional flavouring. Having been raised with very little in terms of culinary experience and possessing no sweet tooth, Crane did not mind this too much and was one of the few to actively choose salt when presented with the option.

The additional painkillers which were provided with his meal to alleviate the pain in his wrist until the doctor could see him were also very welcome.

Seated alone yet nestled within the general chaos of the dining hall, the only interesting information he could gather from tuning in to the general chatter was that other maximum-security inmates enjoying Arkham hospitality at the moment included Dent, Nygma, and Ivy. He had hoped to have his wrist bandaged before breakfast but two of the in-house medical doctors as well as three nurses were lost in a recent riot with another doctor reportedly refusing to return to work.

For once, Crane did not appreciate the understaffing.

Breakfast consumed; he was currently on route to the Arkham recreation room. The higher-profile inmates enjoyed a separate rec-room away from regular inmates due to their inability to ‘play nice’ and the seclusion was a welcome change as it allowed him to indulge in his work more easily.

Entering the room, he immediately set out on a familiar path.

His first stop was always the bookshelves, to select some literature for him to enjoy until something more interesting came along to capture his attention. Finding very little to meet his interest he picked a well-worn copy of Moby Dick from the shelf and moved on. His long legs carrying him to his preferred high-backed chair which sat along one of the walls towards the rear of the room; a perfect vantage point for him to observe others without being too overt about it. Plus, there was a small table which was bolted to the floor in front of the seat and it was the perfect size for the odd game of chess or chequers depending on his opponent.

The availability of engaging games within Arkham was absolutely bare bones.

Juvenile games like Twister had been taken away after an inmate tore the plastic arrow from the spin board and attempted to lodge it in the throat of another inmate; not that Crane missed this particular game as his dignity often refused to allow him to take part. Games involving dice had been removed due to an unfortunate suicide involving an inmate self-inserting dice down his throat until he choked to death, and any game involving sporting gear had been removed in a hail of blood and rage.

It was dire.

Chess and draughts were all that remained with the pieces of each game being made of soft-plastic or foam and dramatically oversized to ensure that they could not be inserted into any orifices.

“Well, well, well,” a drawling tone dragged him from his thoughts, “look what the Bat dragged in.”

Glancing upwards from his book to look at Ivy, Crane could not keep the sour look from his face.

“Pamela.” He greeted her, venom in his eyes.

“Johnny-boy.” She levelled his gaze with her own, unflinching. “How’s the wrist? I heard it was broken by a little boy.”

“How’s Harleen?” Crane bit back, unwilling to give her the rise she was looking for. “Last I saw her she was holding up the Fifth National with her one true love.”

“She is a grown woman who is entitled to do as she pleases.” Ivy replied coolly, the twitching of her jaw the only giveaway to the nerve Crane had struck.

“Hurts though, doesn’t it? That rejection? The fear that you have given the last of your humanity to a woman who will nev-”

“How does the Scarecrow feel to have his wrist broken by a flying monkey?” A third voice joined the fray, cutting across Crane, and the obnoxiousness was unmistakable.

“Very witty.” Crane cracked a smile which only added to the sourness of his expression as he inclined his head to Nygma. He turned back to Ivy as he waved the newcomer into the seat opposite him, continuing. “As much as I would love to keep up this little discussion, I have some business to attend to at the moment and I doubt you would be interested.”

“For once, I believe you.” Ivy smirked at him, ignoring Nygma completely as she was prone to do. “Feel free to drop dead.” She added cheerfully before turning and marching to the other side of the room, taking a seat near Dent who was poorly attempting to hide his interest in the exchanges of the other rogues behind a large newspaper.

“Business?” Nygma raised a brow as he seated himself opposite Crane. “Since when do we conduct civilised business?”

“When it suits us.”

“Valid point.” Crane conceded, steepling his fingers below his chin as he set into his pitch. “But my business involves that little side project of yours.”

“The cryptocurrency?”

“What?” Narrowing his eyes, Crane did not even know what that was. “No.”

“The nightclub?”

“No.”

“The aquar-”

“Goddamn it, Nygma. The real estate.”

“Ahh,” leaning back, Nygma matched his position with a wry grin, “and what, exactly do you need?”

“I need a new base of operations, one capable of withstanding my various experiments and potentially housing a guest for an extended period of time.”

“Oh, Jonathan Crane, you sly old dog.” Nygma grinned, forever unable to resist a goad. “Things moving fast for you and that special little lady?”

“Hilarious as always.” Crane deadpanned. “Can you do it?”

“As much as I would love to give you a new home, Crane, I have a very strict policy of not renting any of my personal spaces out to known criminals, as ironic as that may seem, but I can give you the number for a truly excellent estate agent who I am certain you will find more than satisfactory.”

“Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack. However, seeing as you asked so politely, I have recently acquired a new two-bedroomed home on the outskirts of Gotham South. Closest neighbours are five minutes away and the home possesses both a security system and a large basement.”

“Sounds ideal. Price?”

“Twelve months of planned attack locations and three vials of toxin antidote. Make is six vials and I will create a full new identity for you to pay amenities and bills with vastly reduced difficulty.”

“Acceptable.”

Pushing his body forwards, Crane took Nygma’s hand in his own, tactfully keeping his broken wrist close to his chest, and shook it firmly. Verbal contracts were all the rogues could depend on and in situations where they were not pitted against each other they were worth their weight in gold. To betray a fellow rogue for no good reason created a ripple effect which could be felt for months after the act.

“Chess?” Nygma inquired, indicating the nearby board with a lazy hand.

Crane nodded his consent.

Saturday 5:00pm

Breakfast within the asylum enjoyed the muted peace of inmates who were still adjusting to life after a long night of medication. It was hard to build aggression and chaos when your blood was tainted with sedatives which were strong enough to allow the staff to relax as the darkness of night passed.

Breakfast was usually peaceful.

Quiet.

Organised.

Dinner possessed no such decorum.

Chaos was king and Crane grit his teeth at the noise as he narrowly avoided being barrelled into by a sprinting inmate, two guards hot on his tail, as he collected his dinner tray.

“GRAB HIM, DAVIE!”

“YOU GRAB HIM YOU PRI-”

A short yelp followed by several grunts indicated that the inmate had indeed been caught but Crane did not spare the ruckus a glance. The bolts which secured the rows of metal tables to the floor occasionally caught a glint from the sharp, fluorescent lighting overhead as he dragged his tray to the nearest empty table. The edges of the tables had been tactfully shaven down and curved to ensure that no sharp edged were left available to the inmates for any nefarious purpose. The linoleum on the floor had the sheen of a flooring which had been recently cleansed of carnage.

“Good evening, Doctor Crane.” A soft voice.

Glancing up, Crane was surprised by his guest but quick to cover it.

“Arnold Wesker,” Crane blinked once at him, “good evening.”

“May I join you?”

“If you wish.” Narrowing his gaze as the unthreatening man took position by his side, Crane could not fathom why Wesker would initiate conversation. He could count on one hand the interactions they had shared through their work. “And will Mr. Scarface be joining us tonight?” He added, prodding for information.

“No.” Weskers’ pale eyes took on a sudden sheen. “Mr. Scarface is not allowed to be with me when we get put in the asylum. I worry for him.”

“Worry? Why?” Perking up, Crane could smell blood like a shark and he immediately transformed his expression into one of concern as he sank into a familiar, predatory role.

“Anything could happen to him if I’m not there. He’s not too big or strong.” Wesker fretted his hands and Crane could feel his bouncing leg sending vibrations through the table. “I’m scared they’ll hurt him.”

As much as he would admit to enjoying some of the more theatrical aspects of his work, it was undeniable that sometimes a subtle approach could produce fantastic results with very little effort.

“Of course,” Crane soothed, “of course. But then again, with you trapped in the asylum it would be really difficult to know if he needed you. I mean, they could be breaking him apart right now.”

Weskers’ eyes widened, and Crane could see it. The fear. It flickered through the puppeteer’s expression like flashes from a camera and Crane took each one in with satisfaction.

“No!”

“Or setting him alight.”

“Oh, they CAN’T.”

The fretting become more frantic, his hands reddening with the friction as Wesker swung his head around as though looking for someone to help.

“They can.”

“Leave the poor bastard alone.” Dropping into the seat across from Wesker, Harvey Dent made his presence known with a resounding thud as his large frame caused the table to shudder. “You’re a real piece of shit, Crane.” He spat with thinly veiled contempt.

“Ahh, Dent. Just the disgraced former city official I wanted to see.” Ignoring Dent’s eye twitch at his disrespect, Crane turned back to Wesker. “You can leave now.”

Jumping in place as though shocked, Wesker followed the instructions like a trained pup as he shot to his feet and quickly disappeared from sight.

Watching him go, Crane made a quick mental note to push further on their next encounter.

“I have nothing to say to you, freak.” Dent shrugged, his broad shoulders pushing at the thin jumpsuit. “I just wanted to ruin your twisted fun.”

“I actually have a proposition for you.”

A flash of suspicion cross Dent’s features as he narrowed his eyes and cocked his remaining eyebrow in disbelief.

“You want something from me? Are you kidding?”

“Unfortunately, no.” Crane pursed his lips to a thin line. “I was recently, let’s say, ‘let down’ by an acquaintance who I am aware you have had dealings with previously.”

“Who?”

Crane provided the name.

“Hrrm,” Dent ran a scarred hand across his jaw as he considered his options, “yeah I know him. Little bastard stole some money from me and scarpered a few years back.”

“Do you know where I could find him?”

“I could.” Dent shrugged. “I know who to ask.”

“Do it and I will compensate you for the information.”

“Money? You’re going to pay me?!” Dent’s laughter was a rich baritone and the volume of it drew more than one curious glance which Crane was quick to discourage with a simple glare. “You don’t have any money, Crane. Everyone knows you're broke as shit." Harvey continued, looking far too amused for his own good.

Crane's brow furrowed but he did not rise to the, unfortunately accurate, accusation.

"If you would prefer something other than monetary gain then I could offer you some insight?" Crane offered, tone honeyed, as he fought to regain control of the conversation. "For example, we could discuss and address that constant underlying fear which tells you that you've sunk so low since your acid attack that you're nothing more than the scum which you used to convic-"

"Finish that sentence and i'll blow a hole in you with my magnums." The whites of Dent's knuckles could be seen as he tightened his fist against the table.

Typical response.

"Can I count on your assistance then?" Mindful of his broken wrist, Crane subtly dipped the afflicted limb lower to make it less of a target should Dent choose to attack.

Dent, for whatever reason, did not and instead settled on a verbal response.

"Get fucked."

Again, typical response.

Saturday 10:00pm

"Visitor, Crane."

Dragged from his readings by one of the guards, Crane afforded him an irritated glare and was pleased to see him swallow nervously. His discussion with Dent had not went to plan but that was always a high possibility. Dent was uncomfortable around him as he knew that Crane was fascinated at the divide within him and how it manifested in his psyche.

Crane was also aware that Dent was one of the city officials who had lobbied to have him served with the death penalty early in his career as a criminal. A potentially sad end for such a promising career in educational criminality and Crane had never forgotten the slight.

So, all-in-all, not the best conditions for a good working relationship.

"Visitor?" Crane enquired, fixing the guard with a pointed look as he was escorted from his cell and led towards one of the interrogation rooms.

The guard ignored him.

Adjusting his wrist within the makeshift sling he had created with the fabric from one of his thin pillowcases, Crane considered requesting some more medication for the dull ache which was refusing to leave his joint but the thought was driven from his mind as he entered the interrogation room.

"Crane." A hoarse grumble greeted him as he entered.

“Come to break my other wrist?” Crane growled back.

To his credit, Batman did not flinch at the insinuation.

“Where are your remaining chemicals?” No apparent time for pleasantries, Batman immediately made his business known. “The invoice for your shipment shows that you received at least three times as many supplies as you used in the office attack.”

“Why should I tell you?” Crane settled his expression into pure contempt, straightening his spine to stand at his full impressive height, knowing that he did not intimidate the man before him but still wanting to demonstrate strength.

“Over ten people had to be admitted to Gotham General,” Batman hissed, slamming his gloved fists against the flimsy metal table in the centre of the room “luckily, they were administered with anti-toxin before any real damage could be done. You lost, Crane.”

The human vocal cords were a glorious thing and over the years he had discovered that if enough people were subjected to his toxin in quick succession that their screaming would often form its own melody. From shrill to hoarse, they would eventually settle into a rhythm, a devil’s cacophony, until they succumbed to the waiting darkness.

He was no Mozart, but he was a maestro in his own right and those office workers had performed as finely as any orchestra.

“Did I?” Crane smirked. “Then why don’t I feel like I did?”

“Where. Are. The. Chemicals?” Each word was punctuated with a solid step towards his position, but Crane held his ground as Batman advanced towards him.

“I cannot remember,” Crane enunciated back, “the pain medication for my wrist is dulling my recollection.”

Lips curling into an unpleasant smile, Crane gestured to his broken joint.

“Take him back to his cell.” Batman growled at the guard by the door, clearly unhappy with his lack of success. “He’s not going to cooperate.”

x-x-x-x-x

Keeping his gaze trained on the floor as he was led back through the asylum, Crane considered his next move. He had established a new residence through Nygma, Dent had been unwilling to offer any assistance, and the Bat was aware of the existence of his surplus chemicals. There were too many players on the board for him to consider at the moment, but he allowed his thoughts to drift between them. It was not until he was back inside his cell that he glanced up. Only to be met with the sight of-

“Get out.” He demanded sharply.

“Do you think I get any say in this?” Nygma retorted from his position on the newly installed upper cot.

The asylum cots had been designed in such a way that if the asylum was to become overcrowded then a second cot could be installed at a height and secured into place, almost like bunk bed.

Crane, understandably, hated it.

“I don’t care. Get out, now.”

“My cell is no longer available, or I would happily fight for it.” Nygma again protested. “Do you think I want to share a space with a monster such as yourself? Then again,” he added after a moment, “I would certainly prefer you over the alternative.”

“Why? Who has been moved into *your* cell?” Crane inquired, curiosity winning over rage.

“Pyg.”

Crane paused. “Ah.”

Lazlo Valentin.

Professor Pyg.

He was one of the few rogues who were prohibited from sharing a cell with another. While initially showing no violence towards a previous cellmate, Pyg had snapped one night and used a scalpel to commit terrible acts of violence against the sleeping inmate. Even someone as stoic as Crane had to confess that the gossip that spread about that incident was…particularly unpleasant.

Nygma was the first to speak up.

“Did that poor soul eventually perish?”

“No.” Crane answered, twisting his shoulder slightly to alleviate the pressure on it. “As far as I heard the doctors were able to save one of his testicles.”

“Christ.” Nygma blanched for a moment before smirking slightly. “Did you hear the rumours about where he smuggled the scalpel in via?”

“I dread to think.” Crane deadpanned as he dropped into his cot. Now unable to see Nygma, he sighed his annoyance once again.

“According to sources, he smuggled it in via one of his lower orifices and I also heard it was not the *traditional* one. I just hope he had a cap on it, that or he knows a good urologist.”

“Christ.” Echoing Nygma’s earlier words, Crane tucked a thin arm over his eyes to block out the remaining light and, hopefully, Nygma’s twitterings.

Sunday 4:00am

It was the breathing that dragged him from his sleep.

Ragged and broken, there was no denying the distress which was held within and it took Crane a moment to place it.

Nygma.

He briefly amused himself by considering picking up his pillow and using it to put the other man out of his misery but elected to ignore that impulse in favour of believing that the irritating genius would uphold his half of their deal.

That said, what kind of scientist would he be to deny the opportunity for some fieldwork when it was presented to him.

Under previous doses of toxin, Nygma had demonstrated a clear fear of his father and was verbally inclined to protest his innocence of an accusation of ‘cheating’. His reactions were most likely the residual trauma of physical and emotional abuse suffered as a child, which also lent explanation to his intense narcissism and lack of impulse control.

Boring, yet easy to exploit.

Dragging himself from his cot as he prepared to begin some subtle verbal manipulations while his cellmate slept, Crane caught sight of the small analogue clock which hung directly opposite his cell and was amused to note that it had been just over a full day since his admittance to the asylum.

A full day in Arkham.

Never a dull moment to be had.

Scarecrow

The Shadows Lantern's Cast

by H.T.Vitols

Doctor Jonathan Cane,

Personal Medical Log: Recording Number 41

Date is: 3rd of the February 1967.

Time is: 9: 45 pm

Location: Arkham Asylum

Asylum, what a strange word to use for a place such as this. Asylum, where those of faith will seek sanctuary to be safe from the damned and sinful. But this place is for the sinful and the damned, the sick that came here are not here for salvation but for to be stashed away from the normal. The small minds the normal have, no ambition, no precedence for brilliances but they are more than willing to lockdown anything they deem unordinary. They divide people, all kinds of people for so many reasons, from their skin to a woman speaking her mind. They all end up here, now don't get me wrong I'm not saying all the people here are righteous and misplaced, far from it. I am simply saying that I deem people, all people as individuals, as there are commonalities in groups of people, but no result is ever the same.

The truly sick can never hide what they are, at least not from one who knows the signs, and believe me I know the signs. Fear, fear is what drives them, I understand fear, it is an old friend and a guiding light in dark times and for the longest time I only analysed fear.

Update:

Time is: 10:07 pm

What is fear?

The hippocampus is closely aligned with the amygdala, the hippocampus and the prefrontal cortex, this helps the brain interpret perceived and even unperceived threats. They are implicated in higher-level in the processing of internal and external contexts, this helps a person know whether a supposed threat is real. For the laymen, fear is an unpleasant emotion caused by the threat of danger, pain, or harm. Fear is many things, it is your lifeline when everything else is unclear, it can also be what leads you to your death. It holds the key to the evolutionary processes that has allowed us to be the dominant species on this planet, without fear there is no life. Life I hold in my hands.

Today my patient is one Mr. Noah Kuttler.

Patient number: C-483

Mr. Kuttler has a nasty habit of spreading nasty rumours around the cell blocks and having some wild spasms that cause many to disembark from his company. Now he is on my table today to go through some more therapy. Prior to today I have been using Insulin Coma Therapy, although this has been effective for his body, his mind has not yet felt the full force of fear, so I am making the switch to Metrazol Therapy. This will allow Mr Kuttler to have more consciousness in his sessions and retain information of his time here, I will also be adding a contaminant of my own design, it will enhance the activity in the amygdala this will allow for a better look at the effects of long-term fear exposure.

Update:

Time is: 10:16 pm

The world is getting more filled with fear every day, after Kennedy was shot the whole country had a wave of fear wash over it. So naturally, ‘we’ started a war in a country we have no business being in, it’s Korea all over again. Everyone started losing their minds as fear took over, everyone is after ‘us’: the Russians, the Vietnamese, the ‘China men’, it’s all the same. People trying to take control of their fear by pushing it onto something that can be ‘fixed’, someone they can kill and then all the fear will go way. I know better than most that that is a rare and elusive result.

Others think they can run from the fear. Trying hard to get into orbit, ‘The Great Space Race’, the papers call it, I fail to see what is so great in stretching far past our reach before ‘we’ are ready. The dark fear of space though terrifying, is not one I consider viable in any of my work, arrogant as that may be. I am a self-admitted hubristic man, but I am not one to be derailed from my work due to outlandish possibilities. I will move my work forward at the pace it is able to do, I will let it tell me where I need to do. I may be reaching for the stars, but I have no interest in being among them.

I say there is another way that others indirectly do not deal with their fears, it is through blind unadulterated hatred. Take the riots a few years back, I don’t even think the riots have anything to do with laws being passed, mind you I am not suggesting that this is not the case for other places, but Gotham has always had a flare for the dissident and basically will take just about any and all excuses to have some kind of revolt. It is one of the many reasons I moved here, any place that quick to anger must have deep rooted fear in its walls and peeking out of every crack of its concrete.

But to every action is an equal reaction, in this case the wave of these fears is being challenged but what was been dubbed ‘The Summer of love’. The young have always been one of misplaced optimism, unaware of the real pain that awaits then when they finally wrap the minds around the true nature of life’s privations.

Or perhaps I am being optimistic, after all my life has always fallen on the penury side of things. Those of opulent temperaments and overindulgences, may never face the consequences of the vexatious parts of life. But that is not the only remedy that is trying to emerge in these troubled times. A man, a single man, has decide to try and wield the fear of Gotham as a weapon. Such a thing is of course, a vain attempt to give order to a city full of heretics. I am no exception for I heard the demon’s horn and came here of my own volition. But fear is not a weapon, it is a state of being, a contract of consequence, so fear on its own is a foolhardy weapon, for it can become regressive if over stimulated, one does not fear what they know is coming, even if that thing is initially horrifying. So, fear can be finite if you do not know how to truly harness it.

But I am starting to ramble.

Update:

Time is: 10: 32 pm

I will be making two injections into Mr. Kuttler. One of which will be 2mgs of Metrazol and the other will be 3mg’s the aforementioned homemade compound. This will allow for stimulation and cognitive awareness of the fear that is big experienced. However, I am finding it hard to see, as my worktable is only lit by three lanterns mounted in front of me. It doesn’t allow for a lot of visibility but the shadows that the lanterns cast are allowing me to do my work undisturbed by prying eyes and narrow minds.

The two injections have been administered; I am now waiting for a reaction. It should take about 1 minute and 45 seconds, then the seizures will set in, then the other compound will create hallucinations, this will continue for about 20 or so minutes, I will be monitoring his brain function and heart fluctuations, during this time. So far, my success rate has been rather lacklustre, but what can one expect since I have had to downgrade in my facilities. Working like a dirty racoon in the dark, I am doctor for god sake, with these lanterns on the walls like this you would think I was some kind of plagued dwelt, cursed to not see the above world for the simple crime of being delusory. Well, in any case my work has continued, despite some of my best efforts.

Update:

Time is: 11: 05 pm

Patient number: C-483

Name: Mr. Noah Kuttler.

The procedure has been completed, and patient is alive and resting.

Note: The procedure of Metrazol Therapy, though violent, has a minimal mortality rate in roughly about 10% or so, at any given trial lasting about 2 to 5 weeks. However, combined with my…Fear Toxin as it were, it has increased the overall risk to fatal outcome from 10% to about 30 to 40%. Though this has held back some prolonged testing, the overall outcomes have been somewhat successful.

I have had some less then desired results in the past and have had to take, unfortunate measures, I have had to schedule 4 lobotomies in the past few years and though it allows me to continue my work, the loss of a test subject is regrettable, as finding a replacement can be rather taxing. Though this basement with its lanterns' light, leaking pipes, cracked concrete with the smell of death, sulphur and swamp water, and a chill that is somehow muggy, may not be the best option or environment for my testing but I will take what I can get.

As for Mr. Kuttler he is holding steady and will recover in a few hours of rest. I must say despite my setbacks I have been making the most of things. Now, I must wait until Mr. Kuttler can be moved back to his cell.

Update:

Date: February 4th

Time is: 1: 13 am

It would seem, that hiding in the shadow's that these lanterns cast was only a temporary solution. I had hoped that a little more time would past before this location was found.

Bang. Thud. Bang

'Open up, Crane…'

But I suppose that even a stopped clock is right twice a day and by the same token, every now and then, Arkham security actually can do its job with competence.

Bang.

'We know you're in there…'

That being said, I had timed my leave with Dr Julius cigarette run, he does like to share, so he runs out fastest, but it seems I have not done enough to cover for my whereabouts.

Bang. Thud.

‘Don’t make this harder than it needs to be...’

I currently have every few options. I can fight them, but after that there is no way for me to get out of here, I could kill them all, but I fear at these hours I no longer have the strength to do so. My only viable option is to destroy my work and continue at a later date, though it pains me to do.

Thud. Bang.

‘Get on the floor and come back to your cell quietly and we won’t use force…’

I will hide the recordings and hope that will be enough for me to continue. However, I will play with the security a little to make it more convincing.

Bang. Bang. Thud.

‘Crane…final warning, open the door…’

Thud. Thud. Crash

‘On the ground, Crane. Hands behind your head.’

Oh, shit.

‘Get on the ground, now…’

Well, hello gentlemen,

‘Cane on the ground…’

I am afraid you are going to have to make me.

‘Get in and take him down…shit, he's got knife, take him down, take him down now.’

Ha…ha…ha…haroo…haraa

End.

Who Framed Edward Nigma?

by LFthinker

Part One

The Crime

Riddle me this: How does someone find a way to win, and still lose?

I realize of course, that this is more philosophical than the usual conundrums I stump the Caped Crusader with, but a riddle is a riddle. Normally I would never even dream of giving a hint, but I'm in an indulgent mood tonight, for reasons that will become apparent. So have a seat and let me tell you the story, and perhaps if you can figure out my riddle, I'll let you find my socks.

It began as it usually does in Gotham City: on a dark city street on a dark black night. On this particular night, I, Edward Nigma, Prince of Puzzlers, was alone in my spacious apartment hideout. Well, one of them. It never hurts to have more than one place to hang your hat, as well as hide the proceeds from your latest escapades, but I digress. This particular hideout was nestled away in Gotham's lower Bowery. Opulent enough for my standards, but out of the way enough to stay under the radar from the Bats and GCPD.

As I said, I was alone, sitting at my kitchen table, nursing my third lukewarm cup of coffee and looking over the blueprints for a new puzzle box I was to debut at my heist of the Gotham Met. My right-hand women, Query, and Echo were out of town at the moment, having insisted on taking a brief vacation. As I was feeling generous, and not in the mood to be thrown into my couch again, I agreed. As much as I love my girls, I didn't mind the time to myself either. It was a typical early summer evening in Gotham, the rain a steady background noise while I was working. I also kept a radio on the table, tuned to the GCPD frequency to get the jump on any unwanted activity nearby. So far, nothing more interesting than a gas station robbery in Downtown and a mugging in Central Park. Quaint, really. I checked my watch. It was just after midnight, and I'd been in my seat since seven. I gave the blueprints one last look and shrugged. Even geniuses such as myself need their beauty sleep.

I got out of my chair, popped my back, gathered the remains of the Chinese takeout I'd ordered for dinner and carried them to my garbage. Just when I thought about drawing myself a bath, a voice cut in on the police scanner.

"All units, be advised: we have a murder in Forest Hills. Address is 2470 Forest Hills Court. Deceased is a white male, approximately 40 years of age."

I stilled the instant I heard the address. I knew it well. It was a sprawling mansion located in the finest neighborhood on Gotham Island. And the home of Daniel Mockridge, former CEO of Competitron Gaming. And my former employer.

I wasn't always the suave, dashing figure you see on television and in mugshots after all. Once I had been a lowly video game programmer at Competitron until Mockridge had denied me my cut of the royalties and my proper due as a gaming genius. Well, I couldn't let that stand. One kidnapping and attempted murder later, and I was fully established as the premier criminal mastermind in Gotham City, and Mockridge was left a sniveling wreck. That had been the better part of ten years ago, and while I never made another attempt on the man, I kept an eye on him. From what I understood, Mockridge barely left his house anymore, so shattered he was by our close encounter. His death satisfied my vengeful streak, but I couldn't deny that the news unsettled me. *Oh well*, I thought with a shrug. I was only one in a long line of people that Mockridge had screwed over. While I may be on GCPD's radar, I doubted they'd consider me the sole suspect-

Another crackling noise from the dispatcher put paid to my hopes. *"All units be advised: there's an unidentified object at the crime scene. It...looks like a box, with question marks drawn on the sides."*

Well, *shit*. Whoever killed Mockridge was determined to put the blame on me, and knowing the lackwits at GCPD, they'd stop considering any other possible suspects. And to be fair. 'I couldn't have committed the murder because I was in my apartment planning a robbery' doesn't hold much water as an alibi.

I stood in my kitchen, chewed my lip and pondered my two options. The first, and more sensible one, was to get out of town, join Query and Echo on their vacation and wait for the whole mess to blow over. The second, and by far more dangerous option, was to track down Mockridge's murderer myself.

Well, I've been called many things throughout my life, but 'sensible' is not one of them. Moreover, someone actually had the nerve, the audacity, the sheer unmitigated *gall*, to pass this mere murder as my work! I couldn't let that pass, I'd never be taken seriously in the underworld again.

The first deduction I came to, still standing in my kitchen, was that whoever killed Mockridge wasn't just some random disgruntled former employee, or run of the mill robber. It takes courage, and not a little bit of insanity to be willing to incur my wrath by framing me. My best bet was to start looking at my fellow Rogues. I stepped out of my kitchen, walked to my living room safe, entered the six-part combination and pulled out my most precious item. A small black book, containing the most up to date information about my fellow Rogues. I went back to my seat at the kitchen table, opened the black book and began to read.

Some people collect stamps or baseball cards. I collect information. Information is a valuable commodity after all, and in this life, can very often be the difference between success and failure, life and death. My chief success in Gotham, indeed, the reason I've been able to stay in the game for so long despite the lack of powers or special weapons so many of my other colleagues have is my use as an information broker. Trading in information was what helped pay for my gear and my henchmen in-between my encounters with the Dark Knight. Right now, however, I needed it to serve a different purpose. If I'm going to be hounded by the GCPD and Batman, I would much rather prefer if it was for something I actually did, thank you very much.

I flipped through the pages, quickly reviewing the information on my fellow Rogues. Half of them I could dismiss out of hand as they were in custody. Of the remaining half, I mentally ran through each name like a checklist. I was on good terms at the moment with Oswald, Selina, and Harley. Harv and I were at each other's throats as usual, but he was far more likely to just shoot me than frame me for murder. Ivy hated me, but this didn't fit her MO either. Jonathan and I had come to blows, figuratively and literally over an ill-fated attempt at robbing the Gotham City Gun Show three months prior, (Which I refuse to accept any blame for. I told him not to use the fear toxin until after Batman had arrived damn it,) and he is by far the pettiest son of a bitch I've ever known, but he couldn't go for a walk down the street without that toxin of his, so I felt comfortable ruling him out. Jervis was passive-aggressive enough, but he was spineless. He'd be too worried about what I'd do in retaliation, as he should be. Freeze, Croc, and Scarface had no alibis, but no real motive to come after me. If Hagen was involved, it would be as a hired gun, not on his own initiative. Which left two suspects: Temple Fugate and Arthur Brown.

I gave each name in my book a closer look. According to my most recent notes, Fugate had disappeared from Gotham City after his arrest for attempting to blow up Mayor Hill and several onlookers at a Court building dedication ceremony. He had also attempted to kill me a year and a half ago over a stolen antique clock. Query and Echo had put him in intensive care for that stunt. I hadn't heard through the grapevine about an escape, but if anyone could manage it, it would be Fugate. Then there was Arthur Brown, aka Cluemaster. We'd shared a hideout five years ago, and he repaid me by stealing my gimmick. We'd been feuding on and off since, most recently over which one of us exactly was going to rob the Gotham Met. (I won, of course.) Murdering my former boss and placing a fake puzzle box at the scene of the crime was exactly the sort of thing he'd do. My last notes on him, dated a week ago, had him as escaped from Blackgate, but his current location was unknown.

I shut the black book, returned it to my safe, and headed to my bathroom for an overdue shower and a clean change of clothes. If I was going to solve this mystery, there was one stop I had to make first, and I was underdressed. Twenty minutes later, freshly coiffed and dressed in my favorite custom green suit, I collected my bowler hat, umbrella, and cane from the hat rack by the front door. The game was afoot.

Part Two

The Iceberg Lounge

Five blocks away from my current abode was the Iceberg Lounge, the premier nightclub for both the well-to-do and nefarious sets in Gotham City. The rich twits and celebrities go to see the mobsters, the mobsters go to see the celebrities, etc. etc. The owner, Oswald Cobblepot, served as the perfect bridge between the two worlds, being both a member of the social elite and the top pawnbroker, smuggler and mediator between the other Rogues. More importantly, he was a good friend of mine. If he knew the current whereabouts of Fugate and Brown, he'd freely tell me.

It was ten minutes to one AM when I made it to the front doors of the lounge. The dinner crowds were long gone, but there would be people at the bar still, as well as any underworld folks who had business interests. The Maitre'D still stood in the entrance, giving me a snooty look until I closed up my umbrella and he got a good look at my face. "Mr. Nigma," he said with surprise. "We weren't expecting you."

I flashed him a grin. "Well, I'm just full of surprises. Is Oswald in?"

"Yes, he's in his office. I'll escort you." I followed the Maitre'D into the lounge. The lights were low in the restaurant, though as I thought, there was a decent-sized crowd still at the bar, too deep in their cups to notice me. Off to the right side, I could make out a handful of Ozzie's employees tending to his penguins in the large exhibit he had in the lounge. How he tolerated the smell was beyond me, but he claimed it added to the lounge's character. Finally, the Maitre'D stopped in front of a door and knocked on it. "Mr. Cobblepot, Mr. Nigma's here to see you."

"Send in him," I heard my friend's voice from the other side of the closed door. The Maitre'D gave me a quick nod, then opened the door for me. I stepped into a small if lavishly decorated office. Sitting behind the desk, smoking a cigar was the rotund figure of Oswald Cobblepot. "Edward," he drawled, beckoning me inside with a wave of his hand. "Come in, come in." I shut the door behind me and made my way to a plush red chair set up in front of Oswald's desk. Almost as if he'd expected me. "I take it you're here about the 'unfortunate' passing of Daniel Mockridge?"

I chucked as I took my seat. "You've heard about that I see."

"It's been all over the news," Oswald answered. He pulled a cigarette carton out of his jacket pocket and held it out to me. I took a cigarette from the carton and let my friend light it for me.

Smoking isn't a habit I indulge in often, but I needed something to take the edge off, and getting tipsy was out of the question. Oswald lit up his own cigarette and took a quick puff before shooting me a look. "Just between us, you didn't actually kill the man, did you?"

I rolled my eyes after taking a long drag on my cigarette. "Really, Ozzie. Don't you think I'm beyond killing a man in his own home? Without leaving a riddle? I thought you knew me better than that."

Oswald held a hand up to placate me. "I meant no offense," he said in a patient tone. "I was just curious."

I shook my head. "Have you heard any details about the crime?"

"Through my sources in GCPD, I've heard that Mockridge was shot twice in the chest with a .38. No fingerprints left, of course." I frowned. Normally, I leave the shooting to the girls, but when I did use a gun, the .38 was my choice. "There's the puzzle box left at the scene, which I'm sure you've heard about. Last I heard, the bomb squad was still having trouble getting it open.
There's one other detail that's being held back for the time being: Mockridge apparently was severely beaten before he was shot. The coroner believes that the bruises left on the body were made by a long, heavy object, like a golf club, or a cane."

My cane, I could hear Oswald say. I took another long drag and pondered this information. Whoever wanted to pin the murder on me was nothing if not thorough. Well, it's not as if I was the only Rogue in Gotham who used a cane, even if I was the most stylish. "I checked my dossier before I came out here," I said. "I've ruled the suspect list down to Temple Fugate and Arthur Brown."

"Just those two?" Oswald asked with a raised eyebrow. "You're not considering any of Mockridge's associates? Or another disgruntled former employee?"

"If they were going to kill the pathetic son of a bitch, they'd have done it years ago, not waited until he was little more than a recluse," I argued, putting my cigarette out in the crystal ashtray Oswald had sitting on the left corner of his desk. "And besides, the puzzle box, the use of my favorite handgun, not to mention the use of a cane...this is personal. And no one in our esteemed little gallery has more personal motives to strike against me than Brown and Fugate."

Oswald took a few more puffs, clearly mulling over my words. "You do have a point there, Edward."

“Of course I do,” I sassed, drumming my fingers along the oak top of Oswald’s desk, only to stop when he shot me an irritated look. I took my hand back and gave him a sheepish grin. Oswald’s a good friend, really, but he doesn’t always have the most patience for my little...eccentricities. “Sorry. Anyway, I’m looking into them, but I’m afraid my information about them is a bit lacking.”

“And so here you are,” Oswald nodded. “Well, you can rule out Fugate. Word in the underworld is that after his last stunt with Mayor Hill, he ‘volunteered’ to join Lawton and company in Task Force X.”

Task Force X, or as it was popularly called the Suicide Squad. I’d been approached to ‘volunteer’ once myself, only for the powers that be to deem me unsuitable due to my ‘narcissism and delusions of grandeur.’ Delusions indeed. As if it was my fault no one else in their little team could keep up with my brilliance. But I digress. “Well, bully for him,” I said, swallowing my irritation. “Which leaves dear Arthur.”

“Indeed,” Oswald said. “He came by the lounge three nights ago, asking if I could spare him some men and weapons for his heist at the Gotham Met.”

“The heist that I planned first!” I shouted. I ought to have known Arthur would pull a stunt like this to try to cheat me out of my rightful earnings. I unclenched my fists and took a deep breath. “I hope you declined.”

“Of course I did,” Oswald assured me. “Everyone knows better than to steal a heist out from underneath another Rogue. It simply isn’t done.”

Everyone but Arthur Brown, apparently. Even Rogues had standards, though Arthur barely qualified as such. I’d had henchmen who could make a better run at being Rogues than Arthur Brown, which made his all but assured involvement with this debacle even more galling. I gave Oswald a vindictive smile. “Quite. Now, would you happen to know where he’s staying? I think he and I are overdue for a friendly chat.”

Part Three

The Complication

I took the calculated risk of going back to my apartment for my car before making my way to the location Oswald had given me. Luckily, my safe house remained undiscovered. The rain had stopped too, leaving behind a layer of fog that blanketed the city. Much more preferable to the smog, if you ask me, though it did necessitate a slower speed than I'd have liked. The address Oswald had given me was 22 Sprang Way, which was located in the lower West End, in a neighborhood that bordered the Narrows. A charming part of town.

When I arrived at the address, I parked my car across the street. It was deserted, with only one car parked in the driveway in front of the rundown house. I checked my rearview mirror to make sure no one followed me before performing a quick scan of the street. No sign of life. I pat my coat pocket, triple-checking to make sure my .38 was there before I hopped out of the car.

As I approached the ramshackle townhouse, with it's boarded up windows, unkempt exterior, and weed patch of a lawn, I couldn't help but sneer. Even by Arthur's standards, it was a dump. No, I take that back. Garbage would be embarrassed to be dumped here. No lights were on, but in this town, that didn't mean anything. I took a few careful steps up the front porch, paused in front of the door, took my cane and rapped the head of it against the door.

"Arthur!" I called out. "It's Edward! Open up! We need to talk!"

Silence. Either Arthur was out, or he was hiding. Well, one way to find out. I reached down to pull my lock-picking tools out of my pocket, leaning my cane against the door. I had the lockpick in my right hand and put my left hand on the doorknob for support when the knob gave way and the door opened.

This caused me to take a step back. This neighborhood was two deadbolt country at minimum. Even the Joker wouldn't be so foolish as to leave the door to his hideout unlocked. My eyes narrowed. Not unless he was setting up a trap. I grabbed my cane with my left hand and pulled my .38 out of my coat pocket with my right. I counted to three, then pushed the door open with my shoulder. That was my first mistake.

The lights were off, as was expected. What wasn't expected, however, was the dark lump lying in the middle of the floor. I took a few hurried steps forward and examined the lump. It was a body. Specifically, the body of Arthur Brown. I'd recognize that tacky costume anywhere. I felt for a pulse. Nothing. "Damn it!" I cursed. "You would up and die on me, wouldn't you Arthur?"

A nuisance to the last. I put my gun back in my coat pocket and turned the body over. That was my second mistake. Arthur's eyes were wide open, as was his mouth. No signs of life however, and no obvious injuries. I'm no medical examiner, but it certainly seemed like an unnatural death to me. The only real clue I could find was that there seemed to be mud on Arthur's coat. Some of it got on my gloves, much to my dismay.

I was so busy looking over the body that I stopped paying attention to my surroundings. My third, and final mistake. I was so engrossed with solving the riddle of the death of Arthur Brown that I missed the sound of the door opening, or of the footsteps slowly, but surely making their way towards me. "Nigma."

I, I must admit, nearly jumped out of my skin at the deep voice behind me. I whipped my head around, only to see the last person I wanted to see that night. "Oh, *shit*." Batman stood above me, staring down impassively at me through that ridiculous cowl of his. I realized in that instant that I must look rather suspicious, hunched over Arthur Brown's dead body as I was. Great, now I was being set up for *two* murders. "Riddle me this-"

"Not now, Nigma," the Dark Knight growled.

I scowled. "Rude. Well…" I gestured to the body. "This isn't what it looks like. I was merely-"

"Here to confront Arthur Brown about framing you for the murder of Daniel Mockridge."

I felt my jaw drop. "What-how-"

"I followed you here from your apartment," Batman continued. "I know that you and Brown didn't get along. Naturally, he'd be your first suspect."

I must have looked like the biggest moron on Earth, gaping at the vigilante as I was. "Oh, well done," I grumbled. "If you keep this level of deduction up, I may let you help find my socks! So what, now you're going to take me off to Arkham for the murders?"

"Arkham yes, the murders no," Batman said. "I know you didn't kill either Brown or Mockridge."

This...well, it was a relief, but I wasn't about to show him any gratitude. "And how exactly did you work that out? Was the lack of a riddle a tip-off?"

"That, and the fact that if you wanted Mockridge dead, you would have done it years ago." He reached down to grab my shoulder and pulled me up. Normally I'd put up at least some token resistance, but I had enough on my mind without getting pummeled, thank you very much.

“Don’t move,” he warned me before he crouched down to examine the body. I thought about making a run for it, but I knew how that would end. I settled instead for taking another look around the room we were in. It was...barren. Too barren. The only piece of furniture was a kitchen table a few feet to our left. Arthur wasn’t a hoarder, but he wasn’t this clean either.

I took a quick look at Batman, where I spotted him...scraping off a piece of Arthur’s skin? Well, that was disgusting. I took advantage of his distraction to go over to the kitchen table, in the darkness, I thought I could make out a package on top of it. When I was next to the table, I could make out...a blinking light. A cold layer of dread settled in my gut, but I’ve never been one to leave a riddle unanswered. I looked down at the package and sure enough, it was a bomb.
And the timer read 45 seconds. 44, 43…

I turned to run to the door, only to collide with Batman. He’d seen me move, apparently. He saw the bomb and picked me up, much to my dismay, running towards a boarded-up window. He dove out, me over his shoulder, and rolled us clear just as the ramshackle house blew up, wood and glass going everywhere.

I lay flat on my back, dazed, a ringing noise in my ears. Well. This was getting serious. Once my senses returned, I gingerly got myself up and started to walk towards my car, only to feel a massive hand on my shoulder. Batman was there, glaring down at me. “Nigma,” he said. “You’re coming with me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Really? I’ve been framed for two murders and you’re going to lock me away in Arkham? You know I’ll just break out and solve the case for you.”

“I’m not taking you back to Arkham,” Batman said, half leading me, half dragging me towards the Batmobile. “Until I find out who’s behind this, you’re staying with me.”

“I most certainly am not!” I shouted. “I’d rather go back to Akham than have you carry me around like a sack of potatoes!”

Batman’s grip on my arm tightened, and he leaned down. “Think about it Edward!” he shouted. “Whoever killed Mockridge and Brown knew that you would come here and set up a bomb! They aren’t just trying to frame you! They want to *kill* you.”

Perhaps it was the explosion or the way that Batman was glaring at me, but for the first time in a long time, I was genuinely afraid. I gulped and nodded. “Lead the way, Dark Knight.”

In hindsight, I really should have just joined Deirdre and Nina in Vegas.

Part Four

The Partner

Half an hour later, Batman and I were barrelling down Main Street in his ostentatious car. Normally, I'd take advantage of the opportunity of being in the passenger seat of the Batmobile to study the inner workings of the car and file it away for future use. However, the attempt on my life had rattled me. And also, the fact that my hands were cuffed in front of me was a distraction. "Really?" I asked. "Some partnership."

"This isn't a partnership," Batman growled, not even having the decency of making eye contact with me. Jerk. "This is making sure you don't get into any more trouble."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm touched. And here I thought you could care less if your Rogues started offing each other. It would make your life easier, wouldn't it?"

Batman didn't look at me, but I noticed something in his posture change. "I've never wanted any of you dead," he said. "I want you out of this life, but that doesn't mean I want you dead."

You know what's worse than a liar? An honest man. For a long time, neither of us said anything. I fiddled idly with the cuffs, only to stop when Batman sent a glare my way. I exhaled. "So," I said. "You don't think I killed Mockridge, but our best suspect for framing me is dead. Thoughts?"

"How did you come to think Brown was the best suspect?' Batman answered without answering.

"Well obviously, whoever did this has a grudge against me, and the only people brave enough to come after me like this are the other Rogues," I said. "And once I eliminated the people in custody and the ones I'm on good terms with, that left Brown and Fugate. Fugate's off with the Suicide Squad-" Batman's eyes narrowed and I couldn't help but smirk. "Yes, Dark Knight, I know all about Amanda Waller's little project, but that's neither here nor there. That left Brown." I let out another huff. "Which leaves us at square one. Maybe Fugate has the juice to do it from whatever hole Waller has him in-"

"The Rogues aren't the only powerful people you've angered," Batman interrupted. "Moreover, Mockridge''s home had a state of the art security system. One that showed no sign of being tampered with."

I considered this. That fit with what I heard about Mockridge's paranoia and Brown was no hacker. "So then whoever got into his home had to be let in."

"Exactly. He would have had no reason to let Brown in."

I really, really hated when he was right. "Alright then, riddle me this, Dark Knight: if it wasn't a Rogue and it wasn't me, who was it? Who else would want Mockridge dead and would want me to take the fall-" A name suddenly popped into my mind. "Charles Baxter," I murmured. "He and Mockridge were business rivals for years. And he still blames me for that nonsense with his toy company a few years back." Baxter was the President of the Wacko Toy Company. He'd hired me to design toys for him during an ill-conceived attempt at reform, the less to say about that, the better. His company's stock had taken a dive when my plan to kill Batman was foiled, leaving Baxter a few million poorer, and more important for him, embarrassed. "So that's where we're going? To interrogate Baxter?"

"We're making a stop first," Batman said, making a sharp right turn down an alley. He brought the Batmobile to a stop, and I saw Robin waiting for him on a motorcycle. The top of the car opened enough for Robin to approach. He looked at me askance and I greeted him with a jaunty wave of my hand.

"Stuck with baby-sitting duty I see," Robin quipped if one could call it that. "What have you got for me?"

Batman pulled out something from his belt, a small petri dish. I realized that it was the skin sample that he'd taken from Brown's body. "Take this and get it analyzed." Batman turned to look at me and his eyes narrowed. "What's that on your gloves?"

I looked down at my mud-spattered gloves. "Mud, obviously. I got it on me when I was examining Brown's body."

A look passed between Batman and Robin. Then without a word, Batman reached over and began to pull my gloves off my hands! Keep in mind, I'm still cuffed as he's doing this, the brute! "Excuse me!" I shouted. "I paid good money for these gloves!"

"They're evidence," Batman said with as much patience as I had, which was none. I put my hands in my lap, out of his reach, which made the vigilante clench his jaw. "I'll get you a new pair," he said. "Now hand them over." I acquiesced, holding my hands back up and allowing him to remove the gloves. Truth be told, I had a half dozen pairs just like them back in my apartment, but the day I made things easy for Batman would be the day I died.

Batman handed my dirty gloves to Robin. "So you're going to see Baxter? What then?" the young pest asked.

"I'll check in with you then," Batman answered. The top of the car slammed shut, and once again, we were on our way. Batman said nothing further to me, but my brilliant mind was already working through what had just happened. Something about my muddy gloves intrigued the Bat and the Brat, but- The answer hit me like the proverbial bolt of lightning. Was it mud on my gloves...or *clay*? “You suspect Hagen’s involved, don’t you?”

If Batman was surprised by my deduction, he didn’t let on, not that he ever acknowledged my superior intelligence anyway. “Yes.”

I frowned. If Hagen was involved, that could explain why Mockridge opened his door. Hagen may have impersonated someone he knew or expected, but if he was the hired gun...well, the man is as vain as some people think I am. Why hadn’t he made his presence known? Why not further cement the frame up and be seen as me?

Oh, cement. That’s clever. I’ll have to remember that. “Well then,” I said, putting my feet up on the dashboard. “There’s another question to ask Baxter.”

This time, Batman did react. “Get your feet off my car.”

Part Five

The Epiphany

Riddle me this: if you were the President of a major toy company and you were brought face to face with the man who cost said company millions and humiliated you in the national press, what would you do? If you answered, ‘pull out a shotgun’ congratulations! You’re a reactionary idiot, just like Charles Baxter. The man didn’t seem to notice or care that Batman was right beside me as he pointed his gun at me. “Get that, that...*maniac* out of my house! Right this instant!”

“Oh really Charles, is this any way to greet an old business associate?” I asked, raising my still cuffed hands. Baxter’s face became even redder and he looked ready to pull the trigger when Batman stepped in between us.

“Put the gun down, Baxter. I have a few questions I need you to answer.” Baxter huffed, but lowered his weapon, not taking his eyes off me for an instant. He gave Batman a curt nod. “Daniel Mockridge was murdered earlier this evening.”

“I’m aware,” Baxter said. “I saw it on the news.” He narrowed his gaze. “Looks to me like you got the son of a bitch that did it!”

“Nigma wasn’t involved, but whoever killed Mockridge wants the world to think he was,” Batman continued. “And who would know Nigma’s signatures better than the man who once licensed him?”

Baxter’s face turned pale. “You-you think I was involved?” he sputtered.

“Were you?” I asked. “As the Dark Knight says, you do have access to my puzzle technology. And you and Mockridge were old rivals.”

“‘Were’ is right,” Baxter said. “Daniel and I buried the hatchet after that fiasco you caused with my company!”

Were my previous employers holding therapy sessions about me? Now there was a disturbing thought. “Still,” I pressed on. “Who’d want me out of the way more than you?”

“Check outside Nigma: the line to get rid of you is forming around the block! And at any rate, it wouldn’t be difficult for someone to rip you off, given how much of a jackass you make of yourself on the news!”

I opened my mouth to retort when Batman stepped in. “That’s enough. Where were you tonight?”

“At a board meeting with my senior staff,” Baxter groused. “You can ask them yourself. And no matter how I felt about Nigma, I certainly wouldn’t kill Daniel to get back at him!”

“The Corporate Shark and the Toy Tycoon. How touching,” I drawled, enjoying the outraged look on Baxter’s face. “Perhaps you had too much sentimentality to kill the man yourself, but that doesn’t mean you didn’t hire someone to do it.”

Baxter let out a disbelieving laugh. “You really think, that if I hired a killer, that I would have sent them after Daniel when I could have sent them after you?”

I raised my hands but found I had no ready retort for that. I hate it when that happens. No, I thought. It didn’t make sense. If the goal was to kill me, why didn’t whoever hired Hagen just send him after me? I’m no slouch, but I freely admit, there isn’t much even I can do against a man who can change his appearance at will.

While I was pondering this, and many other questions, Batman continued to press on. “When was the last time you spoke to Mockridge?”

“Yesterday,” Baxter answered. “He said he had an appointment tonight with a new security contractor.”

“The name?” Batman asked.

Baxter furrowed his brow. “Let me think...Reese something.”

It was as if a bolt of lightning hit me. “Coleman Reese?” I asked.

Baxter looked at me almost dumbfounded. “Why, yes. How did you know?”

I knew because it was an alias I had used on a job a few years back. A job I had worked on with none other than Arthur Brown. But Arthur was dead, I’d seen the body-

Riddle me this: when is Arthur Brown not Arthur Brown?

“Thank you for your time,” Batman said abruptly. He took me by the shoulder and guided me to the door of Baxter’s penthouse. I barely registered the movement, truth be told. I was too busy fitting the remaining puzzle pieces together. I’d been right all along, as always. The exhilaration of right giving way to anger. When I got my hands on Arthur, that duplicitous, conniving, son of a-

The top of the Batmobile popped open enough for Batman to all but shove me inside. “I’m taking you to GCPD,” was all he said before he began to walk to the driver’s side. As he was about to get in the car, he paused. “I’m here Robin.” I looked up and noticed that he had his back turned on me. Perfect. I reached two fingers down my sleeve and pulled out my lock-pick, getting to work unlocking the handcuffs. While I was doing this, I kept one ear on Batman’s conversation. “...I have a good idea of what’s going on. I’m dropping Nigma off at GCPD before I head over to the Met.” I narrowed my eyes. Oh no, you don’t, Dark Knight. This is my game. I took a quick look at our location. We were in the heart of Downtown, three blocks away from the Met. With a click, the handcuffs opened and my hands were free. I could make a run for it now, but it would be seconds until Batman caught me. I needed a distraction. Luckily, my cane was lying at my feet. I took another look at Batman, and, satisfied that his eyes were off me, reached down to grab my cane.

“Edward!”

Oh, of course, the second I get my cane is the moment Batman decides to look at me. I looked up, cane in hand, to see Batman about to get back into the Batmobile, his jaw set. This was my shot, so to speak. I raised my cane, took aim, and fired. Not bullets, of course. If I’d killed Batman, this would hardly be the time I told you, now wouldn’t it? No, what I fired was a variation of the Chinese finger puzzle, enlarged to trap a full-grown man. I’d used it against Robin the First in my very first encounter with the Dark Knight. Batman fell to the ground with a grunt, his arms caught in the trap. He looked up at me with surprise and anger. Normally, I’d take a moment to deliver a clever riddle, but I had no time. Batman would find a way out of the trap soon and I needed to get to the Met. I hopped out of the Batmobile, cane in hand, and ran as fast as I could down the street, cut across an alley, and kept running without a look back. The Met was within sight now, as was my revenge.

Part Six

The Denouement

It had to be well past three in the morning as I ran up the stone staircase that led into the Gotham Met. I could see only dim lights on through the glass windows, as was expected. What was also expected was the fact that the doors to the museum were wide open, the alarm blaring. I shook my head and stepped inside. I briskly walked past three security guards, lying unconscious on the floor, their bodies covered in the same mud I found on 'Arthur's' body. I hesitated for a moment. Arthur was one thing, but Hagen...but pride won out over common sense, as usual, I'm sure some would say, and I pressed on. It was just as well I didn't have my gun, I supposed.

I ventured further down the entrance hall and into the main foyer of the museum. Sure enough, who do I spot standing in the middle of the marble floor, holding a framed artwork with that ridiculous costume and idiotic look on his face? *"Arthur!"*

Arthur, or 'Cluemaster' as he called himself, whipped his head around at the sound of my voice. "Eddie?" he asked rather dumbly. "What-how-"

"Did you really think," I seethed, stepping closer to the man, my hand in a tight grip on my cane. "That this little *farce* would be enough to stop me!?"

Arthur stood as still as a statue in Gotham Square, dropping his ill-gotten gain on the floor. "You-how did you-"

I chuckled. "You know what your problem is, Arthur? What has always been your problem? You have all the creativity of a big-budget blockbuster. You ripped off my gimmick, my puzzle box, even my cane. You tricked Mockridge into letting you into his home using that 'Coleman Reese' alias I concocted for that job a few years back. Then, once I correctly deduced your involvement, you hired Hagen to impersonate you at your hideout. You even set up a bomb to make sure I'd be out of the way." I stopped when I was less than three feet away from him and gestured to the empty room we were in. "And all for this? To steal *my* heist? Even for you Arthur, that's low."

Arthur's face no longer resembled a gaping fish but had now turned red. "And you know what your problem is, Eddie? That damn planet of an ego of yours! You just couldn't let me have this, could you? You always have to show me up, don't you!? You don't respect me, Eddie! You never did! That's why our partnership never worked out!" Arthur laughed then. "Well, I'm done being called the c-list version of you. After tonight, I'll be the smartest guy in town." He snapped his fingers, and a stream of mud shot out of a vent to our left. Oh right. Hagen. The mud stream solidified and formed the monstrosity that was once a mediocre actor. Clayface stood, smirking at me. “You seriously think I did all of this to just frame you, Eddie?” Arthur asked. “What would the point of that be? You’d just get sent back to Arkham. No, I knew that if I killed your old boss, you’d come crawling out of whatever hideout you had to come get me. I thought the bomb would kill you, but I think I like this better.” Hagen took a step forward then, and I took a step back, raising my hands up.

“Now Hagen,” I said, trying not to let on how nervous I was. “I’m sure I can double whatever Arthur’s paying you.”

“I’m not doing this for money,” Hagen said. He flexed an appendage, fashioning it into a sort of clay scythe. I’d be fascinated by it if it weren’t intended to kill me. Oh Hell, I still was. “You remember that film museum you and your little hench wenches robbed last year?”

Of course, I did, but...oh Jesus Christ. “Are you still upset about your old costume displays getting destroyed? I admit the girls can be a bit rough, but-”

“Shut it, Nigma!” Hagen shouted. He raised his arm-scythe high, ready to cut me down. “I’ve been looking forward to this for a long time.”

A note to myself: perhaps I need to start being more considerate of my fellow Rogues. When they stop being morons, perhaps. As I was considering my mortality, I happened to look up at the glass skylight and caught a black shadow. I smirked. “Well Hagen, since you were impersonating Arthur here at his former hideout, you must have noticed who was with me.” I took a quick look at Arthur and saw that he looked confused. “Looks like your partner hasn’t exactly been forthcoming with you, Arthur,” I sassed. “Batman’s my partner in this case.”

Arthur’s jaw dropped and I couldn’t help but laugh. How he’d lasted more than a week on his own was a riddle even I couldn’t solve. “Batman?” He glared at Hagen. “You didn’t say anything about Batman!”

“I can handle Batman,” Hagen said dismissively. “And I don’t see any sign of your ‘partner’, Nigma.”

Another movement caught my eye at the skylight. “Riddle me this,” I said with a flourish. “Why is this man smiling?” I pointed up at the skylight. Arthur and Clayface looked up just in time to see Batman and Robin come crashing through the glass. Really, how much property damage has the vigilante committed in all these years? Oh well. I took advantage of the distraction to dive out of the way of shattered glass. Once I was a good few feet away, I saw Batman and his sidekick immediately launch an attack on Clayface. Well, they were welcome to him. I had another fish to fry. Arthur watched the fight with wide eyes, then he happened to turn and make eye contact with me. I gave him a wave, then brought up my cane. Arthur turned and ran towards the back of the museum, like the gutless coward he is. I gave chase, just avoiding clay projectiles and...ice? Seems that Batman had access to ice weapons now. Useful information to have.

For someone who was attempting to rob the place, Arthur didn't seem to have any grasp of the layout of the museum, for he had run into a Native American Art exhibit that had no exit. Typical Arthur for you. I followed him inside and spotted him picking up a ceremonial club. "What was that you said earlier Arthur, about my never having any respect for you?" I asked, advancing towards him with my cane at the ready. "Allow me to clarify: I show you the amount of respect that you deserve: none."

Something dark flashed across Arthur's face. "I'm so sick and tired of you!" he yelled, charging towards me with the club. Cute. However, I didn't get to be the King of Conundrums by having the girls do all my fighting for me. I stepped to the side, easily avoiding Arthur's wild swing, then with a swing of my cane, I hit him in the wrist, disarming him and making him yell out in pain. I took another swing at his midsection, causing him to double over. Then for good measure, I punched him in the face. Arthur fell backward into a glass and lay there, stunned.

I shook my head and clucked my tongue. "You know Arthur, I have to hand it to you. You're one Hell of a copycat. But you forgot the most crucial thing: a riddle. It's my ultimate signature." I laughed. "No, you didn't forget, did you? You just couldn't come up with one." I leaned down, poking the tip of my cane at his throat, reveling in the frightened look he had. "And that's why, Arthur, I'll *always* be better than you."

Arthur gulped, then wet his lower lip. "N-no hard feelings, Eddie?"

Less than ten minutes ago, he thought he was going to watch Clayface kill me and now here he was, begging for his life. Never change, Arthur. "Sure," I said with a shrug. "No hard feelings." I let a relieved smile come to Arthur's face before I flipped my cane and smacked him in the face with the handle, hard.

"Having fun?"

I turned at the voice and saw Batman and Robin in the doorway, almost as if they were waiting for me. I walked away from Arthur and towards the door with my usual flair. "I've left Arthur practically gift-wrapped for you. Where's Hagen?"

"We've got him frozen in the main hall," Robin said. "We're thinking about leaving him here as a modern art exhibit."

Oh, Hagen would love that. “Well then,” I said. “Gentlemen, it’s been entertaining, but it’s past time for my beauty rest-” Batman grabbed me by the elbow before I could even think of walking out the door. “Oh come on,” I asked. “Don’t I get any consideration for helping bring in Arthur and Clayface?”

“Didn’t we have to save you from Clayface?” Robin asked with a raised eyebrow. Little brat.

I crossed my arms. “You wouldn’t have known the first place to look if I didn't lead you here! I think I deserve some credit-”

“I knew Brown was behind it when Baxter mentioned ‘Coleman Reese’,” Batman interjected, his tone flat. “After I dropped you at GCPD, we were going to come here anyway.”

I really, really, *really* hate that man.

And so, Arthur was arrested and sent to Blackgate pending trial for the murder of Daniel Mockridge, Clayface was taken off to thaw in some police lab somewhere, and I was deposited back in Arkham. Which brings me to the riddle I asked at the beginning of my little tale: How does someone find a way to win, and still lose?

I know what you’re thinking: this must be a reference to myself. I cleared my name and brought Arthur down a peg, but I wound up back in Arkham in the end. Good try, but the person who won, but still lost, is Batman. Haven’t you wondered, my dear doctor, why I’ve been so free with information today? It’s all been one big distraction. By the time you’ve finished decoding this missive, I slipped under your door this morning and realized the game, Query and Echo will have secured my release. The alarm bells must be going off right about now if you’re a fast reader. I’m dreadfully sorry I’ll have to miss our sessions, but for being such a good sport, maybe I’ll bring you a souvenir.

The End

Holy One Track Bad Computer Mind!

by midnightsingvogel / Lualie

A comically large map was unrolled right there on the pavement, barely held in place by two hands covered with what seemed to be an unnecessary amount of glitter and glue, which also enthusiastically speckled the map itself in the worst possible ways.

“Oookay, so! We’re here, right?” She pointed at a spot on the map, smearing more sparkling powder everywhere, or the other way around…

“Approximately. A little more on the left, actually. No, Harls, the other left.”

The dubious collage kept fighting tooth and nails to roll back into shape. A sheet of the Gotham Gazette had been glued as a base beneath the more delicate print of the layout atop it - which was to say, whatever adhesive had been used only made the entire thing stiff and frankly uncooperative.

The woman sat cross-legged in front of it. A dangerous habit in Gotham, especially without a recent tetanus booster shot.

“And we go allll the way around this part, and get to the Square uptown! All of that within one hour time. Everything’s fair game. First one to get there gets dibs on the next lonely billionaire strolling into Gotham looking for trouble.”

“You do realize I do this all the time, right?”

“What? Which part?”

“Precisely Harley.”

“Aw, don’t be like that Lina. It’s gonna be fun, you’ll see!” She winked conspiratorially at her, as if the unsubtly of it was enough to relay any kind of relevant information.

Selina rolled her eyes, but the blonde could see a fond willingness to humour her a little longer.

“So are you two set yet?” The third woman in attendance lifted her head to stare at them, unimpressed. She’d been scrolling on her phone, her patience quickly dwindling as the three of them kept going over the same conversation for the past half hour.

“Right. Remind me why we couldn’t just... meet up at your place? You know, as usual?”

Harley scratched her neck, tittering a high sound with darting eyes, and a guilty grin growing on her face. The map, finally sensing its chance, snapped shut viciously, spitting a puff of glitter at her. “Ah well… So, about that…”

“Just to be clear,” Selina teased with effortless confidence. “I don’t mind parkour. I just don’t think you’ll be able to win this one.”

There was a sardonic grin on Pamela’s face, eyeing Harley meaningfully. “Miss Quinzel here picked a fight with the walls of our living room and kicked a few holes in them.”

“I can’t be held accountable if you put me in a box for too long, seriously! We’ve been cooped up for too long, Pam!” The blonde groaned loudly, legs bouncing. In a single motion, she jumped upright back on her feet, raising both of her indexes to drive her point home. “But I **did** try ta fix it though!”

“And now the entire living area smells like wet plaster.”

“You woulda thought it wouldn’t start smelling moldy if you’d just turn down the humidifier for a day, Red?”

“And you wouldn’t be making holes in the wall if you hadn’t been kicked out of the gym next door.” The redhead added matter-of-factly.

“Oh no.” Selina made a valiant attempt at keeping her poker face. “What did you do this time?”

Harley gasped, snapping a hand to her chest in mock-betrayal. “Me?! You shoulda seen the other gal!”

She chanced a look at Pamela, who still looked mightily unimpressed and raised an eloquent brow at her. Harley winced and made a wide nonchalant shoulder roll.

“Ah ya know me. I don’t like sharing and I’ve got no patience at the gym.” She said, growing more and more agitated as she went on. “ So I went for the uneven bars, but some bird got to it before I did, so, me and Red still being on low profile and all,” she rolled her eyes at the very thought, but went on, “I was on the balance beam for a bit, playing nice, but then she was just grilling me, still hanging from the high bar like she had nothing better to do, and I was like, ‘*the fuck’s her deal*’, and then she did it a second time and next thing ya know we was throwing hands…”

“And then she got kicked out.” Pamela finished with a small smile. Or a grimace, she wasn’t sure. There was a lot of blood going through Harley’s head and she couldn’t stop giggling at the memory.

“Pretty much, yeah! We did go get some drinks at the Lounge afterward.”

“And we’re probably going to get drinks sometime today if you two manage to get started on this, yes?”

“Oh right! Right. You ready Lina?”

“Sure Harls.” She said neutrally. “Pam, if you’d do us the honors?” “You

know I have opinions about ‘honors’; I don’t do them.”

“It’s a manner of speech, Pam.”

“GO!!!” Harley took off like a bullet, clutching the map tightly like it was the Torch of Clown Olympics itself, before turning the corner sharp and out of the alley, into yet another alley, and probably into a lot more of them for the next hour.

Selina and Pamela remained right where they were, staring at the junction Harley disappeared. There they stood until the sound of her footsteps and the occasional shouts of dismay were finally swallowed by the city. Only then did Selina turn to the redheaded woman, shamelessly batting her eyes.

“So, can I get a lift?” She asked congenially. “Not

very honorable of you, Selina.”

“Hey, I thought you didn’t care about honor?”

“I have opinions, it’s not the same. However, you may buy my silence with Starbucks.”

“Sounds agreeable. I’m keeping the lonely billionaire looking for trouble, though.” “You

can keep them.”

They walked back back to the car in companionable silence until Selina froze, staring downward with a hand on the passenger door.

“Hey Pam?”

In lieu of a response, the botanist walked around the car to see what was the matter. Uh.

Next to the boot on the wheel was a hand drawn caricature of Harleen blowing hearts and expletives at the reader, with the caption SEE YA CHEATERS in sparkly ink.

“Hm. I guess that’s why she went back to get the map. She could lead the GCPD straight to our place if they were bothered to track her glitter trail...” Pamela commented cooly. A growing look of consternation settled on her as she willed the boot into nonexistence. Alas, she took her phone out of her pocket with a resigned sigh.

“What are you doing?” Selina looked ready to walk out of this entirely, but curiosity won over her apprehension.

“I know what she’s doing, and we’re not going on a wild goose chase after her.”

The cat burglar stared at her brisk typing, allowing the dots to connect like lazy cats moving to a sunlit window. “Let’s just call an Uber?”

“Already on it.”

Admittedly, it was a pretty good day for a run. Gotham’s perpetually damp air didn’t stick to her lungs too badly, at least not the way it did after dark, and the coolness of its backstreets felt refreshing after the long few weeks inside her apartment.

Determined to let her good mood carry her faster, Harley jogged past through familiar decrepit streets (this particular kind of pale peeling yellow that blends with the ambient greyness), then saw one very cute family of rats wearing those little cone-shaped corn chips (they wouldn’t let her take one, she could have but them on her fingers), and finally, notably, spotted one disgraced psychologist playing chubby bunny with several brass knuckles at once, leaning behind a dumpster.

Well it was probably him. He always wore nice boots with his ragtag pants. He used to wear soleless burlap and it did a number on his rickety spine.

Acting on a whim, she had just enough time to grab the lid of a garbage can and swiftly bat off an incoming toxin dart randomly aimed at her, which unfortunately landed itself right in the old rogue’s leg instead.
And she may or may not have thrown the lid at him frisbee style for good measure, probably sending killer glitter in his eyes while she was at it. The lid unfortunately hit the brick wall over his head, ringing an awful lot before falling unceremoniously on the man’s head like an improvised cymbal.

“Sorry!” She called, sounding anything but sorry. Following her momentum, she jumped. Her joined feet barely missed the man’s bird-like legs as he recoiled in pain from the previous hit. She bounced daintily, half-skipping ahead on her merry way, leaving the echoing ode of an angry man’s howling in Bitch Major in her wake.

The sound of vehement muttering still reached her ears a while, although he must have realized who he’d tried to shoot. Comes with the risks of picking your test subjects right out off the streets. Ah!

… So maybe this wasn't the direction she and her friends had agreed on earlier. But, she figured, since neither Selina nor Ivy weren’t really taking her growing jitters seriously, she might as well cause a little mayhem while they were figuring out what she had really been up to. They’d figured it out. Maybe.

So MAYBE she had gotten herself a bit off track so she could mess around. Big deal. She knew this part of Gotham like the back of her hand. So yeah she was definitely not lost.

“I’m definitely not lost. You can’t get lost in Gotham, just follow the street numbers...” She gave

the back of her hand a suspicious look.

Harleen forcely unrolled the chart she had taken with her, frowned at it thoughtfully then flipped the entire thing around. Wicked glee spread on her face as she tracked the real incentive that brought her into this part of Gotham.

“Let’s see…” She mused, eyes skimming over the cheap paper of the Gotham Gazette. “Butcher cutting his victims and stuffing them in a bag… Boring… Glassblower blowing up in the Narrows… Well, someone had a blast!... Kids missing in this part of town….. AH, there you are!”

Vintage arcade THE CABINET to celebrates its grand re-opening at the end of February-

Harley abruptly crumpled the page in her excitement, nearly tearing it apart as she unfolded it just as fast. Her eyes slid over most of the articles and stopped when they caught the address. Her feet jounced into motion before she was even done reading.

Shucks. She remembered that place! It used to be SO BIG when she was younger. Whatever happened to it, she hasn't got a clue. Doesn’t matter : *she was going to pulverize some scores today!*

She saw it even without double checking the address. The facade was big and gaudy and retro in all the best ways one of these places could get! In a lovingly crumbly and faded kinda way! The flashing lights of its neon sign, rave-colored, hummed and hooked and reeled her in like a chorus of electrical chittering angels sizzling on her brain. She barely registered decking the unfortunate collage into a desecrated flower bed as she was inexorably pulled toward her destination, a gentle gasp on her lips.

She inhaled shakily and splayed her open wide palms over the windowpane, peering inside with raw anticipation.

It’d been a quiet day so far. Not a lot of new people at the arcade lately.

A foreboding feeling made the man at the reception booth look up from his phone, catching the fuzzy outline of a silhouette with a gleaming snarl, looking right at him. Dread and creeping terror caught in his throat and started trickling down his spine when the shape suddenly blurred into motion, and in came shapes and colors into the games parlor.

As she stepped inside, he would have thought the woman charming if it hadn’t been for the troublesome grin she bared. It could probably power the whole building with how much it beamed, and it kept growing impossibly wider with each step she took toward him. Her eyes were slightly bulging at the sights around her, as if they had the personal mission of absorbing as much information as humanly possible.

So yeah, another Monday in Gotham.

She stopped, stood, and inhaled deeply. “It smells like something died in here, just how I remembered it!”

“Ma’am, can I help you-...” the man trailed off, unsure what to make of the statement.

“Oh I’m good! You just sit tight, I know how this works. I even brought my own quarters and all!.. Ok, I took them off some thugs a couple of streets over, but, yah know...”

The man stared in silence as she giggled prettily at whatever money-gathering convention she had eluded to. He laughed feebly along with her.

“I used to come here back in the days, ya know? But I’m not sure what their deal was? The folks wouldn’t let me play the games I wanted?”

The man bravely attempted a smile, or a rictus, or suffered an impromptu bout of stomach aches. “Gatekeepers here, 20 years ago? You don’t look- I mean-” his voice wavered uncertainly, and she waved graciously.

“Oh nah! The owners, actually. Whatever happened to them? The shady bastards owe me at least 7 dollars in quarters.”

This somehow turned the receptionist into a water fountain, as he started sweating profusely. Hopefully the building was insured for water damages.

“Oh they just. Uhm.” His mouth snapped shut, glancing briefly at the glass doors leading to the rest of the arcade, and shrugged tensely. “I don’t, really know? I just work here.”

She pinned him with a sharp look until something relented in her posture, and she leaned empathically. “Aww, well that’s alright then, I gotcha, thanks a bunch!” She winked charmily with both eyes and swayed past the booth, visibly done with the conversation.

“Ah… Right.” The man looked an uncomfortable shade of relieved, now featuring hopelessly wet socks, but did not comment any further, which Harley took as a general go ahead and marched right into the arcade room.

The room was an eclectic collection of colors and shapes, bright lights flickering and shining and blinking in blue and pink and purple and green. Little twisted shapes were hanging from the misshapen ceiling, some from strings, some with nails directly hammered into it, even some creatively held in place with some variations of pink chewing gum.

The carpet was hideous and mesmerizing, big loops that went nowhere and everywhere. A swirly and tacky pattern stretching as far as the eyes could see.

Some nondescript game 8bit music was playing faintly from somewhere, fast like the springs in her feet and winding them up just as so.

Harley bit her lips in glee.

Perfect.

* * *

Pam and Selina were sitting in a window booth at the agreed on Starbucks, two drinks in and chatting occasionally, people watching some, and the obvious necessary finger pointing that comes with it.

“I’m still not completely sure why she went through all this trouble to take a run through the city, you know?”

“It’s probably not as fun to her if there’s nothing at stake.”

“Hm. You’re almost making me feel guilty for taking the easy way out.” she leaned in, a conspiratorial smile dancing on her lips. “*Almost.”*

“You can feel guilty if you want.” The redhead rolled her eyes. “It’s been more than one hour in any case, and I’m just here to support her if she needs an excuse to blow up something that isn’t ours. Whatever keeps her away from my special fertilizer.”

“Yeah…”

A contemplative silence passed, until Pam bristled quietly, her plump lips flattening considerably.

“I still can’t believe she booted my car,” she mumbled indignantly.

Selina nearly snorted in her drink, quickly grabbing a napkin. “Have you considered that this was actually a ploy to get *you* out of your green bunker for a little bit?”

She groaned loudly, much like Harley had earlier. “Not this again…”

“Ah? So you know it’s the truth?” Selina teased, her smirk purposedly poking at the prickliness her friend carried like a perfume.

The botanist gave her a long-suffering look then leaned back in her booth, physically and virtually pulling away from the topic. “I think I’ll try that london fog tea latte next, what do you think?”

The cat burglar smiled, like a secret basking in the sun.

Harley had to admit, she may have lost track of time.

It was so weird though. The place had a pretty standard variety of games, but they were all mostly single player ones. Some even sporting giant ugly holes where the second joystick should have been, like someone had torn them off. Pretty stupid from a business point of view, if you asked her.

In her mind, the idea of playing with friends and kicking them in the shins to win felt a lot more fun than just hovering over their shoulder. But heck, what did she know?

They seemed to be functioning normally, so, maybe the owners got some kind of discounts and just didn’t fix ‘em.

She did spare a thought over how fun it would have been to bring the girls along, and then moved to the next station. No need to get grumbly now that she was having a good time.

Still, Harley expected she’d hear a lot more shouting somewhere like this. People getting carried away in the throes of action and all of that. She sure wasn’t sparing anyone for her part. So far, it seemed to be the only thing missing from her memories of the place.

Sure she hadn’t paid much attention to the few kids milling about, too busy checking what kind of games the arcade had, but, now that she looked at them, they weren’t… emoting a lot? Vacant, much? Just moving from time to time? Eyes glued to the flashes of colors on their screen like they couldn’t peel them off it?

Wait, nevermind. That sounded like a teenage thing. Probably, right? Oh g-d, she cringed. It had better not be a generational gap. Absolutely not.

Still, despite the rapid heart beats of the music, the place looked like an inhabited ghost town, a few patrons shifting from foot to foot now and then.

Ugh.

Harley liked to think she wasn't someone who usually beat around the bush, she thought, swinging hard on one of those old-fashioned hammer games (how did it get here?!). A cool contraption, halfway retro and modern. Shiny. Distracting. She might just get one of these. She might just get THIS one. Mmm…

Moving on reluctantly, carrying the mallet with her like holding hands with a familiar face you're trying to get in an Uber, she stopped in front of the next console on her to-do list, and dramatically dropped it as a gasp punched into her.

"OH WOW, it's you! You're THE Cabinet!"

There stood the arcade's most prized piece; a wide box with a big screen, and the typical joystick and direction pad, buttons, "Sure sure, nothing new there. Wait, why are you turned Off???"

She frowned and shrugged, wasting no time putting her glittery grubby hands all over the controls and the screen,

"Some misplaced display of defiance for someone who isn't even there anymore, Harleen. You're holding onto unnecessary anger." she enunciated eloquently, channeling the professional tone she would use as a psychiatrist in Arkham. "This goes along well with your history and general leaniancies for social misconduct and disobedience."

Yeah well, maybe so… but, damn did it feel pretty good.

She had to scrounge around her haphazard memory for a bit, head-scratching, for what she remembered from way back then. Harley's tiny-wee self supposedly not allowed to play, as the game was apparently perpetually out of order. (*Whaddaya mean, it don't work right? Whyddaya keep it in 'ere for???*)

So MAYBE she'd tried to make it work herself, using her own quarters which didn't fall back out like regular disabled cabinet games would. The owners hadn't liked that very much, and still wouldn't give her back her money. (*THAT'S NO FAIR, folks come in 'ere and play when it's dark, I wanna try it too!!!*)

So yeah, understandably she wasn't *really* mad at them. But still, that was 7 dollars out of her teenage hands and that was just dick move!

But nonetheless. She inhaled sharply readying herself for action. She was here now? She was going to make this work.

She looked at it more closely, still touching everything her hands could reach, entirely out of spite. Harley paused, a wide grin slowly stretching on her face. Alright, time to get this show on the road.

She just had to find the On switch or something.

The first thing that came to mind included the foolproof method of Giving-it-a-good-thumping-to-make-it-work and, obviously that wasn't going to fly with something this old. Not if she wanted to play it right.

Well, she amended. The idea could stay on the table, if nothing else. It wasn't like she owned it.

Just her luck, after following the cables attached to it, it seemed like it was just... unplugged. BORING. Still. She hacked a good spitting in both hands before rubbing them together in anticipation, grinning ecstatically as she almost ceremoniously connected the outlet and the cable.

Something happened. She was pretty sure she hadn't imagined the sort of wave that went through the floor. Though, to be fair, she thought that was just her brain enjoying the blissful moment of completion, or maybe her stomach's reporting on her current food situation.

Harley hadn't even turned around, but even she could feel the different vibe in the room, raising the hair at the back of her neck. It felt like a rumble, or like your legs falling asleep but like, your entire body. So maybe like falling asleep on an anthill, except the ants are covering you in honey. That'd be kinda cool, actually...

Harley flinched, frowned, shaking herself out of an odd drowsiness with a start. Why was she falling asleep? That wasn't right.

As she struggled to stand, Harley managed to turn herself toward the room. She blearily took stock of several things that were happening all around her.

a) The console was turned on : Success!The title screen was flickered but definitely working! Not that she could see anything that was on it. There was a crowd standing in the way, which brought her to the second observation;

b) That hammer game was actually going pretty buckwild for some reason. Oh wait, that wasn't really super important, focus Harleen!

c) Every person who had quietly skulked around in the arcade was suddenly standing in front of the big screen, staring at it, completely transfixed.

Except for that one who, unresponsive they may be, still had sticky fingers up their nose and down someone's back pocket. Attalad, that one was totally going places!

There was a quick flurry of motion to her left, and she dragged her eyes back toward the entrance of the room.

d) Deskboy locked the glass door in a hurry, like an ice cream man skidding away from an angry mob of sugar-starved children.

Well, that didn't bode well.

Utterly unimpressed, she brought her attention back to the weird thing happening.

e) The person in front of The Cabinet literally climbed on top of it- hey!

Harley stood up, probably too fast, and caught herself on one of those cushioned driving seats. She'd seen a lot of weird things in her life, most of them fun, but she wasn't sure how to process the kid climbing up and pressing their entire face on the screen and, sortof, falling forward, little sneaker feet disappearing last.

And then the title screen flickered on. Still couldn't see a damn thing. The crowd had somehow doubled in size, piercing eyes unseeing.

"Holy missing relatives! Talk about immersive gaming experience! Ah sh-"

This time, she did manage to right herself, and started through the hundling teens with sharp elbows a lot of '*scuseyou*' and '*I already paid for like, 14 credits*' and '*Wait, that's a baby, where are your parents!*'.

She isn't sure what nagged at her the most; the weird fuzzy headache at the back of her head (headaches, she had them, sure, but that one reminded her of something else...), or the complete lack of response from the kids-OOOH Lookie here, that's the hammer she dropped earlier. It's a wonder nobody tripped on it yet. Then again, it's only funny if they know what's happening...

She finally reached the front of the crowd when she caught an eyeful of the game itself. Nobody was touching the controls, but they were definitely moving regardless. She squinted at the screen, trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

“... Girl’s Garden, 1984… Uh, okay… Well I’m no shrinking violet, come on, show me the goods!.”

A couple of minutes of gameplay, somehow, felt a lot longer than what she’d expected, and she found herself fuming when the invisible player died, pursued by bears.

“That’s *it*? Are you *for REAL*?” She doesn’t hold her voice down, it’s not like the kids have been responding to anything so far. “I’ve been all *WAITIN*’ for 20 *YEARS* to play this *BIG DEAL* mystery game at my favorite arcade, and it turns out it’s some of the same bullshit I’ve dealt with this *WHOLE* smiling mackerel *TIME*?!”

The game returns to the title screen, and Harley had the distinct impression it was looking up at her expectantly.

She felt herself falter, a random thought attempting to grasp onto a sinking feeling of how familiar the buzzing felt, when it finally hooked onto something and tore a hole in her stomach.

Waller… Wasn’t it Waller…. With the screen and the eye clamps…… Oh F-

EVERYONE HERE’S BRAINWASHED OUTTA THEIR MIND!!!

Harley’s entire body startled back, static-like prickling all over her skin, leaving her both heady and weightless. Her hands and feet cold and numb and impervious to the jolts of disgust running through her. She might have been yelling, not that she could hear anything. It could have been the nondescript electronic music, way louder than before.

Reality slammed back into her as she, appropriately, slammed it in the face. She snarled at it, teeth and aggression bared.

“GIMME! BACK! MY! QUARTERS! FUCKING! GOVERNMENT-PAID! MINDSNATCHER!” she kicked and screamed, then miraculously remembered she was holding something hard, and threw a swing so cathartic it almost brought her back in her body.

“ASSHOLES!” she bellowed, throwing her entire body into it.

Harley thought she heard the machine wail an awful, ear splitting sound, which she matched with one of her own.

If anything was grabbing onto her at that moment, it didn’t stop her from smashing the control board with extreme prejudice. Sparks flew aplenty and the pitiful wailing changed pitch, wavering, and then-

A lot of people fell on the floor, taking her down with them.

Harley’s lungs still burnt, and her ears were ringing, but it felt right. Much better. It felt like a welcome kind of agony, even if she couldn’t wait to know what the heck was that all about.

A rumble overhead brought two feet and a body out of nowhere, crashing nicely on the floor of passed out people covering the ugly carpet. One particularly bloodied sneaker bounced and stilled limply a little too close to her face. It’s fine, they had little Hello Kitties on them. Nice.

Speaking of her face, the body allegedly attached to it, Harley still couldn’t feel neither of them at the moment. Still numb and a little cold, but it seemed to settle slowly, like the morning smog mixing with the dew.

But there was one thing she could rely on, and the knowledge shone at the front of her hazy mind like a beacon in the fog, or a whispering neon light in Gotham.

The grin on her face stretched her lips so wide, it almost hurt.

- - - - - - - - - - -

It was dark when they arrived at Pam’s apartment, Selina in tow as she argued that they could pregame at her place before heading out to the Lounge.

It turned out Harley never made it to the rendez-vous point, nor had she texted them either. Pamela shrugged, searching for her keys, though Selina knew she would still be checking her phone regularly. A draft of something burnt and sour came over them once Pamela managed to wedge the door open. A closer look also showed dark marks on the floor.
The botanist exchanged a wary look with her, both nodding as they quietly agreed on a formation. The redhead stalked into her own apartment, leaving Selina at the door with a heady whiff of danger and stargazer lilies.

Barely a minute later, Selina heard her friend call an allclear, and she pushed her way inside as well.

The dark marks on the floor traced back to some kind of contraption, dark cables hanging pitifully and disconnected, a big cartoony hammer leaning against it. Her eyes found Pamela standing behind the couch, her back facing her and arms akimbo, and overlooking something. From the doorway, Selina could see a pair of sparkling shoes hanging from the side.

The blonde didn’t look filthy, per se, nothing to justify the smell that Selina could almost taste, which she could barely describe as the taste a plasma ball would leave on your tongue if you braved a lick.

As for herself, The Cupid of Crime laid dormant, covered in weird patches of soot and burnt clothes and yep that’s definitely blood. Warpaint aside, Harley almost looked harmless in such a peaceful state.

“Looks like she found her way home after all,” she remarked lightly, joining Pamela’s side. “You worry too much.”

“I don’t. And I can’t tell if this is better or worse than the moldy plaster.”

“Well at least you know the smell can be overpowered?” Selina smirked, elbowing her gently. Pamela only groaned in response and crossed her arms. “Come on, she’s had a long day, and we’re going out. Might as well let her rest.”

“Green help me, I’ll never get anything done with you two.”

A snickering came from the couch, followed by muffled fits of giggling. Feeling lucky, Selina nudged Pamela once more in good humour and watched some of the tension leave her friend’s shoulders.

Mad Hatter

FROM A TEA PARTY IN HASTE

by Upasana Das

Dear Batman,

Before you analyse the type, this has been typed on Pennyworth's typewriter you smashed last month and threw out of the manor. Maybe you shouldn't make that mistake and think about all the crazed neuroscientists on your trail, eh? Oh my god, my Alice, what am I saying? Just between you and me Bats, I am not getting another Alice- as you know I realised after so many years that Barbs was the perfect Alice- the Joker would agree with me you know-we comedy men always think alike! Unlike you Bats-missing out on all the fun with a scowl half hidden under a cape.

I still have a blue dress custom made for an Alice hanging up in the right wing closet. Not my house, Bats in case you were thinking of coming for an old check in. Ah, the good days. Now let's play at pretends! Pretend if Barbara were Alice with a pretty blue frock and dolled up hair, she'd say, Is this any way to greet a guest…whom you are about to invite to TEA?

Ah, I can hear the exclamation in your head Bats as I formally invite you to the Never Ending Tea Party of the season at my gardens aka the roof. Maybe it's time you have some fun freshly prepared by me. Maybe you'll enjoy it too, who knows?

Since I am feeling uncharacteristically generous this morning- oh did I eat a chunk from the teacup that was made to reveal people's secrets? Oh nope, those are all locked away in the South Tower of the Manor- that's right! Right under your nose- they will be delivered to another location tonight. Don't make plans yet Bats as the party is TODAY. That's right Bats and this letter will reach you at 3pm giving you two hours of preparation time before you arrive with a scowl on the roof hoping to capture me, Ha! But you see, the moment you step on to the roof which was made pressure sensitive, it will cave in and you will fall a few hundred feet before you reach the basement.

Don't worry Bats, you won't be very lonely in the fall-we actually installed certain ahem- images for the lack of a better word which maybe, let's see incriminating evidence! No, no don't be shocked Bats, no one is incriminating you. It's just us- you know how the thing is with police files- easily swipe-able and evidence recordable. So yeah, if there is no Alice to tumble down with you, we'll just have her mementos won't we? Oh maybe some of her friends too! Like how about Commissioner Gordon or those tiny little men you weren't able to save from our clutches? Maybe you'll find some-ah- motion reference to those- as you see I still have my first old camera. Beady little images that make you want to see more but you see just that bit. Ah Batman, this party commemorates all that makes us human- and counts every inch of our failures starting of course from the time we weren't able to save our parents. It's just a tumble down a memory tunnel Bats as all you've been doing is work and frankly it's making me want to pull some strings.

So when you finally finish the tunnel, you will fall into the basement. You are familiar with it and so you might feel a bit “uncanny” seeing those familiar shadows again, as I hope you will. There will be a huge table in the middle upon which a tube of green fluid would be balanced precariously. Don’t pretend as if you don’t know it, Bats: it is a potent hallucinogen which was in its final stages of development by me when you decided to raid our headquarters and so the final phase of testing will be, why yes you are right- YOU! As I pull the chains from a corner and the fluid falls on you, you will lose consciousness for two minutes which will make you forget everything about the tunnel for the moment and you will see a door in the walls.

As I recall reading in Alfred’s entries that Alice in Wonderland was your favourite before your parents dies, Bats what I am trying to do here is to simply offer you a place to act out your fantasies of Wonderland. That hallucinogen will make you see yourself as EXTREMELY SMALL and then WHIZZ- who goes there? A rat! A cat! From the thrones of the French queen herself! And what are they doing here? Attacking you Bats and so you will need to find a way out- by finding a key to the small doors which is incidentally, as you see from below the table, in the glass tube that has poured its contents on you. So Batman tries to climb the glass table and...succeeds! Only to slip back down the shinny glass legs; and so you begin to rack your brain and remember your Alice- and out of thin air will conjure a bottle of whiskey from a wedding present that was supposed to go a few months ago. Should have made a blast, if you know what I am talking about.

When you drink it, and you must, you will find yourself large enough to reach the table and as soon as you take the key, you will realise you are too large enough for the door and that the animals have somehow grown larger with you. It’s the first thought that will cross your head, Bats, don’t deny it. And thus you shall see. So here, we deviate from canon and bring in Joker, or at least a projection of one who shoots at you.

Beware Bats, the shot may be real. But the bullet is Joker’s usual paper where you will be instructed to IT’S TIME TO DRINK AGAIN TO THE CAT AND THE BAT!

So do us both a favour in making this fun and take a swig from that damn bottle.

As you progress, these Jokers may arrive from time to time as we keep monitoring your intoxication levels which may need a push every now and then.

Well then, you are in through the door and then you see, well Gotham. Why does this feel like a walkthrough? Are you sure Bats that this was not intended for my Secretary rather than you? Hah, I don’t have a secretary other than maybe Brer Rabbit. You’ll meet him- as soon as you open that door. No pocket-watch fantasies go better than a brilliant time bomb does it?

Well then! It’s time to PAINT THE BODIES RED! You’ll see life sized mannequins of all your favourite people- Barbara, Pennyworth, Nightwing and of course, our darling Selina Kyle. Specially commissioned for your wedding from the one and only Madame Tussads- yes, she works for me and beware of the marzipan statues of the bride and bridegroom she replaced with her own art again commissioned by me. In case you decide to eat that devastating cake after all. I had to completely avoid a section of the story as the cake was too damn uneatable! Chocolate and pink icing don't go well at all, I can say. Take some advice Bats and avoid the darn thing. You might just become like Mrs Havisham and stop all the clocks you know. It's your Doomsday after all.

But that is for a different story.

You will need to paint these bodies red until they can't be identified. With what, you ask. Why, wine of course. Just wait till these bread statues are infested by pests of all sorts. Ah, a sight to fill the heart, with what is it that you all call? Ah...gratitude!

And you shall paint. I can see it now, clearly before me as you turn your head upon hearing a noise. What is it, you ask? What is that noise that would raise the dead from their graves? Just between you and me, this is getting awfully Julius Caesar like, don't you think? I read Shakespeare in high school and I think it's an absolutely marvellous play. Totally sets the moos for this thing. Now don't see Damian to read up all of Shakespeare from your library Bats. I don't reveal my preferences more than once. And yet there has always been one exception- you.

Look clearly Bats. They are rising. And with it, it is I. And it's time for the Queen of Gotham to arise, i.e. ME! Oh, don't worry, I shall stick to every bit of the story as I put on the damn lipstick on my face. I've always hated red. Green, is more my colour, don't you think? I can see you staring at it as you stand not defiantly with the wine and I tell you, "Tell me, that I am nothing." And you do.

And then I shall cry, "OFF WITH HIS HEAD! But first, let's have a game of tea. Or rather, let's have Tea." As you must have guessed, this is quite ordinary Tea.

Nah, you know that is impossible! It is actually Darjeeling Tea-quite extraordinary I assure you. If that wedding had taken place, I assure you, while drinking this tea, the only thoughts that would grace your mind is drinking it with Selina while you are old and watching Gotham flourish outside your glassy panes. Sounds quite the story, doesn't it Bats?

It could have been yours.

But we won't let that happen will we Bats? Between you and me, it'll be a miracle if you survive another decade of the tricks and trinkets we pull to get your attention, which by the by leads me

to a table.

Ladies and Gentlemen, all dead we have another guest who joins us tonight. Why are you standing, Bats? It is a table for Tea and there is plenty of space and when all is done, we shall play a game of KILL OR DARE. It's a brilliant game, you won't be bored, don't worry. But drink well Bats, as you suddenly find yourself playing SPIN THE KNIVES and oh, oh did we finally manage to convince you to kill an innocent paper seller kidnapped on the streets of Gotham? It's Trial time and we thirst for violence and injustice! YOU HAVE BEEN ARRESTED BY THE IMMORAL POLICE AND NOW STAND TRIAL AND ALL OF US WHO ARE MAD HERE WILL BE JUDGE, JURY AND EXECUTIONER AND CONDEMN YOU TO DEATH.

Let me tell you about the panel of the jury. On other thoughts, why focus on that when ME ALIAS THE QUEEN OF DARTS AND JOKER ALIAS THE PRINCE OF HEARTS judge your trial? You broke our lives, Bats. You let us have no fun. And then you try and get married so we are left all alone with our broken toys in the asylum? Outrageous behaviour, Bats. Absolutely outrageous.

What remains is to see how that turns out, won't we? Now that you know what to do, follow the address on the letter and in half an hour, you'll be where you need to be. Just a change in venues- you need to collect your typewriter on the roof where Selina decided to not give you your happily ever after. The second part to this saga lies there.

Sorry about that you know, offer my condolences and stuff. But between us, me and all those villains you keep chasing are maybe a tad happy you didn't get your happily ever after.

P.S: Bring your Alice, Bats. Just in case. There is a spare copy in the side window of the left wing.

HATTER.

In the Name of the King

By Ravens and writings

There were more ways to get into the Iceberg Lounge than most people knew. There were the front doors for those just rich enough to gain entry, the VIP door for those rich enough to actually matter, and then there were a myriad of backdoors. Freight entry, employee only, Batman's favorite skylight to crash through, and so on. Harvey Dent didn't use any of them.

The tunnel he took from the docks was one of many. Oswald 'The Penguin' Cobblepot had specifically built the lounge to take advantage of the many smuggling routes beneath it, since he had a hand in luxury imports that were less than legal. Several tunnels existed -- he routinely switched them up, closed them down or blocked them off to keep people guessing. Once Batman had used one, so Oswald collapsed it completely.

Damp and unpleasantly chilly, the tunnel led him right into the wine cellar. The door was normally covered by a rack of very expensive vintages, many of them Oswald's private stock, but it'd been carefully moved forward to a new resting place so Harvey and his two lieutenants could pass through.

"The Penguin's expecting you," said the valet that greeted him. He gestured with one sweeping motion. "Please follow me to the Special Guest Lounge."

Harvey just nodded. There was no point in conversing with the help. He wasn't here for them, and they were loyal to Oswald -- or at least his money.

The lounge in question overlooked the entirety of the club below. The third floor was sealed with one-way glass that was bullet proof and sound proofed, the better to keep away nosy rivals, the Bat's lazier attempts to surveil, and other pests.

What a well feathered nest, purred an inward voice. *Did he install new carpet since the last time we were here?*

Last time we were here, we shot someone. Imagine he had to replace it after that.

"Harvey!" Oswald greeted him jovially from his seat, unaware of the inner musings. Eddie Nygma, clad in his ostentatious green, sat next to Oswald, nursing a drink slowly. "What's your poison today? Say the word, and we'll get it poured."

"What's he doing here?" Harvey jerked his chin toward the former rogue and current detective.

Oswald put up a hand as Eddie opened his mouth and cut him off before the chatty little shit could get going. "Ah, Eddie? He's here to help with our mutual problem."

Oswald's valet pulled out a chair for Harvey, so he joined the other two men at the table. His own pair of lieutenants stood back by the door to one side of it, while a pair of Oswald's goons flanked it from the other side. Eddie sat across from him, chewing on the words he hadn't been allowed to say.

"And what, exactly, is our mutual problem?"

Oswald settled back in his chair, the wine in his glass sloshing inside it. "We have a pest problem. Something crawling up from the sewers that's a touch larger than rats."

"Croc," Harvey confirmed. "How is he your problem?"

"Let's just say I wouldn't say no to new shoes cut from his hide," Oswald replied as he tapped his fingers against his glass. "He stole something from me recently. An egg. Priceless, you know."

"And where does that asshole fit in?" Harvey jerked his chin toward Eddie again.

Eddie's back went ramrod straight. So easy to rile, pride so easily pricked. "I'm investigating! Or at least, that's what I was doing before you got called in."

Harvey let his derisive snort be his only answer.

"Oswald, is he really necessary?" Turning to the fat man with all the charm of a petulant child, Eddie proceeded to whine about the job. "This is a great way to get attention that neither of us need."

The two rogues that played at reform didn't impress Harvey; he'd lived double lives over and over again, and if there was anything that he'd learned from sharing his flesh with his counterpart, or trying to serve both self-interest and justice, it was that it was easy to fall to one and forget the other.

Penguin had already fallen off the wagon. Intergang had been the end of his law-abiding attempts, and rumor had it he was just a pocketed pawn for the Batman now. Eddie, on the other hand… Eddie had his brain scrambled and his outlook on life changed. Supposedly sane, for whatever that was worth, he'd decided to play detective. Beat the Bat at his own game, moving the goal posts so Eddie could once again strive for a winning score in a game that he didn't even know how to properly play.

Eddie has his part to play, his other half reminded him. *He's intolerable, but he's useful. It's a day, that's all.*

Don't have to tell me that. He's a necessary evil. But what an irritating one. We're not going to be able to hear ourselves think.

"I need you both," Ozzy continued, blithely ignorant of Harvey's other conversation. "I know that Croc's got no love for Harvey after you choked the man out a few years back, and your brains has gotten us the general location of his lair, but-- you know his little cadre of sewer-worshippers lay traps for the unwary to make sure he has fresh meat whenever he wants it. Eddie can find and handle them, leaving the way clear for you and your men to clean house. With that team work in mind, the two of you are the best choice for the job."

Eddie sighed, and then waved one hand. "Can't argue with that."

Bet he wants to, the smarmy little shit.

He'll get his.

"Fine. If we're putting me and my men at risk with only your little patsy as your chip in, we take 75% of the spoils," Harvey threw out the offer as he reached for the coin in his pocket. It made people nervous, and nervous people made bad decisions.

"Highway robbery!" Oswald squawked, puffing his chest and going blotchy in the jowls. His eyes watched the dance of the coin over Harvey's knuckle with healthy wariness. "How dare you! 60/40 and not a percentile more!"

"80/20, because you've been a shit about it."

"70/30."

The odd numbers rankled him, and his tongue scraped against the back of his teeth, visible through the gap in his cheek.

Do it! Don't you fuck this up for us, Harvey.

"Deal!" he spat out. The bargain was struck, handshakes were exchanged. Harvey rose, and beckoned Nygma with a flick of his wrist. "Come on. You're with me now."

Eddie downed the last of his drink and shot a sideway glance askance at Penguin.

"You'll be fine," Oswald said. "Harvey's a man of his word. He'll get this stitched in two shakes, and you'll be back and safe in no time."

Eddie stood up, reaching for his hat and cane. "If you say so, Ozzie."

Harvey felt his coin hit his palm before he realized he'd had it in the air. He watched as his scar-dappled palm turned and flipped it again. It took a moment to wrest it back to his control, pocketing the coin and heading to the door.

He traced the scars over the face of Liberty with his thumbnail. *Satisfied?*

Yes, that inward voice spoke. *Yes, we are.*

***

They entered the tunnels through an abandoned subway station; it had been shut down decades ago, and Harvey could think of at least three super criminals who had made it part of their operation. Early in his career, Mr. Freeze had made this one of his hidden cryochambers. A few years after that, the Mad Hatter created a haven for stolen children, letting them climb over the sharp edges of rusted metal and drink sewer water while they thought they were in a Wonderland of spun sugar and gold.

The great quake had collapsed part of it, which is why it went out of use for most. Croc, however, knew the tunnels like he knew his own scales, and would never let this pocket go unused. It was a waystation of sorts - now there were hidden food caches, clothing. A tell-tale alter to the God of the Underground was laden with maggoty meat and bulging canned goods. Croc hadn't been in here in a while, and neither had his people.

That was good for Harvey and his men. Eddie was less than thrilled, wrinkling his nose. He'd changed out of his suit into working clothes; cargo pants, a green button down that had a giant golden question mark over his back, and no cane. His gloves were thicker now -- the better to protect his hands from the filth of the sewer.

Harvey had done the same, though his gear switch was more tactical. Tight shirt, double holster, heavy duty jeans and boots. None of the class he brought to the world above would survive down here. His men -- all rank and file, nobody that was deemed too important to lose -- were similarly outfitted, though most of them had rifles or uzis instead of Harvey's twin Colts that were set snug against his ribs.

Don't worry, girls, you'll see action.

Don't talk to the guns, it's weird.

Fuck you, Harvey, I'll talk to them if I want.

"Well, if I'm right about this -- and I am -- from the rot and maggot growth in the meat and the botulism factories masquerading as canned goods there, it's been at least eight weeks since one of Croc's folks came through here. Maybe more. Might mean that this area's trapped and shut down, might just mean it's forgotten. I'm guessing that it's been trapped up behind them, but to what purpose, I don't know."

"Why do you say that?" Harvey asked, letting Eddie's rambling forestall any internal arguments.

"Because there's no way the homeless will leave a perfectly good shelter alone unless they have to. The hobo signs--" Eddie's lips curled around the term as he pointed one out on the wall, a simple shape with a line slashed through it, "speak of danger, no safety here."

"You can read that?"

"Of course I can."

"Of course you can." Harvey sighed.

He's going to talk about himself incessantly, isn't he? This time the voice went waspish, pricking behind his eyes with irritation.

Of course he is. It's the Riddler. He doesn't have any settings except 'aggravating' and 'unconscious.'

Or dead.

Patience, partner, patience. All things in their time.

"So what next, hobo-speaker?" Harvey grumbled, letting his hands rest on his hips.

"It says dangerous, and it's got the symbol of the cops. Meaning it's been found or raided recently. So they're probably letting the heat fade off, like Ozzie does with the smuggling tunnels."

"Makes sense. Guess Oz and Croc aren't all that different."

"Hey! Oz is a world apart from Croc. He's got an education! I can talk literally anything with him."

"Including growing up working poor? He know how to talk to you about that kind of life, Eddie?" Harvey lazily shot back. Getting the little shit wound was a good way to keep him from being too big for his britches. "You think you're hot shit now, but you're not even nouveau riche. You're just a working class schlub who's a little smarter than most. You're *not* money, though, and that's what the Penguin is. Old money."

"Oh, because 'grandparents were farmers and my dad was a cop' makes you any better than me! You went into *politics* to get out of that shit, for God's sake.

"You have *no* understanding of anything we did," the voice that cracked out of the body wasn't his, Harvey realized. He'd slipped his collar and grabbed the leash. "You never have, you little puke, and you never will."

Stop! We have to have him work for now! Just get to the end of this, alright? Then we can think about what to do with him after. Bide your time.

Two-Face trembled with impotent rage as Harvey slid back into control of the body, stilling the shakes with a deep breath. Eddie stared at him from two steps further back than he'd been at before.

"Look," Harvey said smoothly, long practiced from speaking with skittish victims and tired judges. "Why don't we shut up and get the job done. Can you do that, Nygma, before we lose our temper?"

"Fine," he said. "F--fine."

Eddie, trap-springer and investigator, took point, and Harvey followed after him.

Stay calm. Let's get this job done.

Fine. But I won't like it, and I loathe that little shit.

Nobody asked you too, Harvey thought as he walked in the protective bubble his men made around him. The game was afoot and there was a deal to fulfill.

***

"Fuck, my fingers!"

Not an uncommon thing to hear after the third trap, Harvey sighed and looked over to where Nygma sat, shaking one hand out as if he might somehow flick the pain from his fingers.

"What's the fucking hold up?"

"What's your fucking *hurry?*" Nygma snapped back at him.

God I'm gonna enjoy throttling that little shit.

Patience.

No! I'm so tired of dealing with this. Why can't we just be done with it?

Stick to the plan, Harvey said to his other half. *We stick to the plan. Nygma gets us to the right place, and then we all get what we need-- including silence from Riddler.*

The seething presence at the back of his mind coiled around his neck like a snake, squeezing right, throat constricting. He coughed, shook his head like he might loosen a leash, and then coughed again.

Come on! We're so close to our objective!

When he sucked in another breath, it came in easy. Harvey exhaled, and then glanced at Nygma again.

"How far?"

"If the signs are right," Eddie said, pointing to the one closest to the spring-hammer trap he'd just dismantled, "then we're close. There'll be a safe place ahead. A big cache, from the signs. Lots of supplies. Possibly a lot of people."

"You heard him," Harvey gestured to the four men behind him. "Get locked and loaded, and keep an eye out."

His team jumped to respond, checking gear -- killing their clipped on lights in favor of their lowlight goggles, checking ammo and their weapons.

Everything they had, Harvey himself wore; the goggle aggravated his lidless eye, created uncomfortable pressure, but he put in his eye drops and wore it anyway. "Two of you walk with Nygma, keep an eye out."

Harvey and his other paired guards walked more slowly behind them, listening and alert.

Almost there. Then we'll have what we want and we can get out of this stinking pit.

So close you can taste it, eh?

The only thing I can taste down here is methane and rat shit.

Harvey couldn't disagree. While this was a necessary evil, he didn't want to deal with it much longer. The sooner they got down here for their prize, the sooner they'd leave this hell pit under Gotham and get some fresh goddamned air.

"Look!" hissed Eddie, bringing Harvey's attention ahead of them. "Lights!"

"Finally," Harvey breathed out. "Nygma, back up to me. Let them go ahead. You'll just be dead meat if you're up there."

"I didn't know you cared," Eddie muttered as he came to stand beside Harvey.

"I don't. But you're more valuable alive than dead."

For now.

Harvey and the others hung back before the two other men crept forward -- guns first, ready to fire as soon as necessary. They'd signal, creep forward, sweep, and do it again. Each time, Harvey let the others quickly after them, not wanting to be sitting behind half their firepower at a place they couldn't help them should a surprise attack come.

When they finally found the cache, it was what would have been a central cross roads, though water had been blocked from two pipes and a deck of sorts had bridged half the central exchange, while bridges were built to make for easy crossing. There were piles of boxes - canned and dry goods, sealed up in plastic before being crated again.

"What the fuck is this?" Eddie said as he followed the two men forward. There were no traps that caught his eye, but Harvey stayed safe on the other side of the deck. "This isn't -- this isn't what the signs said it was."

"It's not?"

"No!" Eddie said, pointing at more simple signs at the wall. "All the signs here point to a cache coming in, signs for big and valuable and safe, but that says 'Stay Away At All Costs' and the symbol for the ‘Yard Bull’ -- authorities, people who used to roust travelers off sidecars and such.”

“So this is a dangerous place and protected, then?”

“Yeah. But it’s definitely not what we’re looking for. There’s no way they’d keep anything like here.”

“You don’t say,” Harvey said, looking at the boxes. His men were cracking them open, one after the other, looking for their prize. No eggs were found, whether it was jeweled or packed in styrofoam.

“You know, you’ve been awful calm about all this,” Eddie said, coming back from the deck. “Why aren’t you more upset? We don’t get this done, Croc keeps chewing at your territory and Oswald’s!”

Before Harvey could give his answer, the deck abruptly creaked. Everyone froze, looking to it. The wood warped upward before it gave a wet crunch and heaved downward, crashing away with everything on top of it with it, boxes and men both.

“Watch the water!” Harvey shouted to his remaining men, but it was too late. There were already nets flying forward as men in trash-woven ghillie suits heaved themselves up onto the concrete walkways.

Eddie drew his own gun, but it was lost as soon as a net hit him. He went down with the others.

Harvey stood alone between two of the suited men; one had a visible net, but the other did not. Twin Colts in hand, he looked between them both.

“If you think I’m going down there like that, you’re dead wrong.”

“The King Under the City says that you go like the rest of them,” they said.

“I’ve got two guns that say otherwise.”

Water sloshed around a third ghillie man as he sprung from the water, net thrown.

“He says you go down,” all three spoke, “you go down.”

Harvey didn’t get a chance to argue as filthy water seeped into every gap in his maimed face. Each sting, each bit of burn reminded him of how much he hated Moroni; *son of a bitch got his,* Harvey thought as he was dragged underwater and down another tunnel at rapid speed.

But it was never enough, his other half growled.

His body shot through the air briefly, out from a spout that opened up just for them; he hit a pile of refuse, thick with cloying stink. Rotten meat, human shit, the fetid green smell of algae and spoiled vegetables.

To the left his men were fighting and struggling, but the hordes of men were tearing things from them and keeping them down. To his right, Eddie had taken out a knife and was trying to keep it steady in his wet hands to cut at the ropes.

Then there was the heavy scrape of scale and claw rasping against the stone as Killer Croc came into the room. Torches were lit as he entered with something like a procession -- all of them homeless, wearing repaired clothing, mismatched and ill fitting, and some with stolen weapons. Some of them took up the guns that they’d stripped from his men, and all of them took up places on what seemed to be a stone throne, built to accommodate the bulk of Killer Croc’s atavistic body.

Croc did not go directly to the throne. Instead, he came to the refuse pile, looking down at Harvey.

“My apologies,” he said, as he leaned down and ripped the net open, letting himself work free of the tangles. “I had to keep everyone ignorant, in case of a leak.”

"I did the same," Harvey said, looking at his men. "Then I made sure to bring the ones that were skimming the take, passing info to Penguin or Batman, and Joey, well... Joey knows what he did. He just didn't think he'd get caught. Deaf kids are so easy to fuck up, aren't they, Joey? Who are they going to tell when half the world can't speak to them, right?"

The man in question began to protest until he took a rifle butt to the face.

"I'll put them to good use down here in the pantry," Croc said, smiling with too many teeth.

"Harvey?" Eddie squeaked as they walked away from him, leaving him among the trash. "Harvey, man, what are you doing?"

"It's colloquially known as a double-cross," Harvey replied, as he accepted a towel from one of Croc's retinue. "Your friend Oswald's getting old, Eddie. Croc's been eating at his territory for a reason - the smuggling tunnels are seeing too much use. Especially among the human traffickers. Gotham's got a lot of vulnerable people here, and he's making a pretty penny letting people use the tunnels to get them to boats unseen, shipped off to God knows where for rich people to play with like toys."

"Those are *my* people," Croc announced, spreading his arms like he might encompass all of Gotham in his possessive grasp. "You don't take subjects from a King, you don't take worshippers from a God, and you don't take Gotham's underdwellers from Killer Croc!"

"You gotta be kidding me. Ozzie would never! You've got it all wrong, it's got to be something else!"

"It isn't," Croc said. "Which is why I went to our old friend Harvey. See if he'd be interested in some justice with a side of expansion."

"The coin just didn't come up good for Penguin," Harvey explained. "But it came up great for us."

"Son of a bitch!" Eddie said.

"We staged the theft," Croc said.

"I made sure the leaks knew I was having trouble at the same time," Harvey explained, gesturing around them as well. "Then we made sure that finding us would be just hard enough that he'd want a specialist at springing traps and reading the codes left behind. His good friend, Eddie Nygma."

"Traitor," Croc intoned.

"Why?"

"Like it or not, you're a Bishop on his board. A problem to be removed. One less helpful resource who might help him escape, or help him weasel his way to a better position," Harvey explained. "Plus, Croc seems to think you need to be working for a new boss."

"You were one of us, Nygma," Croc said as he sat down in his chair. "Living on park benches. Eating out of the trash. Your family's here, and they want you back."

"I don't want to go back to that!" Eddie shrilled, shrieking as one of the ghillie men began to haul him away with the rest of Harvey's men. "Harvey, please! *I don't want to be like that again!"*

Harvey watched him, unmoving, as they hauled him down another tunnel, and his screams echoed till they were no more.

"I still think he's more trouble than he's worth, but he's your problem now," he said to Croc.

"I'll find a way to break him," Croc replied, lounging. "But I thank you for bringing him here."

"At least he'll be out of the way now."

“And Penguin won’t be expecting a joint attack on his vice dens or his warehouses where his traffickers are moving people,” Croc agreed, before he beckoned over one of his men. “Marcus will guide you up to the surface. Our men will meet you at the docks at midnight. Then, we deal the bird a blow that he won’t be able to shake off.”

“Your people will be returned to you unharmed, and I’ll keep my end of the bargain: taking those territories and closing the vice dens. Nobody trafficks people in my part of town and gets away with it.”

Croc smiled at him, though it was close-mouthed. Little yellow teeth peeked out, but the threat display was kept behind the curtain of his scaly lips. He stuck out his hand, and Harvey took it.

“It’s a deal,” the King Under Gotham proclaimed.

“It’s a deal,” all of Harvey replied.

One of them would double deal the other, Harvey knew. Croc might consider Harvey a Bishop in his own right, but Harvey knew he was a King in waiting. But that didn’t matter. These were problems for future Harvey and future Croc, he supposed. For now, they were brothers in arms. Tomorrow, a month from now, a year -- that would change. It always did. But for now, they were two of a kind.

Tip of the Iceberg

By H.T.Vitols

Gotham is rather unique, in that most places with rotting infrastructure and corrupt governments don’t tend to lean so hard into that aesthetic, usually places like that tend to keep up a facade as to hide its own putrefaction, in a half-hearted attempt to delude anyone who comes across them that there are civilized. Gotham has never hidden how ugly it is, to a point that it's almost beautiful in an ostentatious sort of way. Not to say that there is nothing alluring about Gotham, quite the opposite. Gotham has a way of claiming the hearts of many, sometimes literally, but the lost and forgotten can always find a home in Gotham, they’re still lost and forgotten but so is the city itself.

The Iceberg Lounge was the closest thing to elegant that Gotham had to offer. The outside was, and forgive the prosaism, Gothic. The doors were lined with white heavy steel and where shaped like umbrellas, if umbrellas were sharp, metallic and had an ominous amount of cleaning done. The doors themselves were wooden, polished and painted indigo blue. The doors were about 4 feet wide and were as strong as enforced steel which coincidentally was inside it, you could drive a car into it, and you would need a new car and a paint job for the door. The top of the door frame which was about 6 to 8 feet upward had a blue and white neon sign that spelled out the name of the club and blue lights that moved around the top of the roof, signalling, daring anyone to enter making an announcement to the police, the city and the Batman, *I’m right here come and get me, if you can*.

The inside of the lounge was far larger than the outside could have prepared anyone for, the ceilings were high, the main floor was laid out like a ballroom, with blue, purple, and white lights slowly dancing across the floor as if they were patrolling lights, that most if not all the patrons were far to use to. The centre of the main room had as the name of the club suggests an Iceberg, it was a rather fitting piece of décor and not just because of the predilection, but also what could be a more apt metaphor for the men and women who dwell here, then a clandestine place that has a chilling and unstable piece at its core and the magnitude of how vacillating it truly is, is hidden under the surface.

There were purple curtains that lined all the walls of The Iceberg Lounge, what was behind them was anyone's guess, a room, a door, an alarm, a wall, a way out, a way in, who's to say. The Iceberg Lounge is home to many in Gotham, the bad, the slimy and the straight up crazy. It is a place to go and to hide, from whatever animal themed hero is on your ass that week. The Lounge is a strong hold and a neutral ground to any who enters.

No fights, No guns, No deaths.

These rules were enforced to the highest measure, not out of any moral obligation but simply to make things easier for business, after all, people are more willing to meet and make deals with you if they know within a reasonable assumption they are not going to be shot. This peace of mind comes with a small price though, any deal made in the lounge has a fee to go with it.

Negotiations: $100 (per person)

Trade-offs: $200

Drug deals: $400

Gun sales (unloaded): $1000 (per every 10)

If you were caught trying to make a deal in the Lounge without permission, well let's just say no one ever does it twice. This level of meticulous control was possible due to the work and obsessions of one Oswald Cobblepot. The man thought rather highly of himself, more so than he should, which is easy to do when you are barely above most door handles and wider than some door frames. Not to say he did not have class or rather his own definition of class, hand tailored suits all with tails, the most beautiful fabrics, and of course a shining monocle that never left his face. And today Oswald donned an indigo blue jacket that had black fathers around his neck so today he looked more vulture than penguin. And in a place where a man with a rodent facade is more productive and less corruptible than the police department and the mayor’s office combined, being larger than life is not only common but a necessity. Oswald had many enemies, in fact if you weren't his enemy, he was less likely to trust you. Having enemies was more repute then having friends as he liked knowing what people wanted from him, it was easier to control the situation and easier to turn the situation into whatever suited him best.

Today, much like many other days, Oswald was in his office at his desk with a small glass of fine port wine at his side. Unlike many other days, he has not allowed anyone to disturb him (other than for an unexpected rodent infiltration). He wrote with a quill tip pen; the pen was white with a black line that matched up with a black swan feather that was connected by a small metal penguin pendant. He did not write with this pen often, as it was as impractical as it was beautiful. He only ever used this pen for one reason.

To my dearest, Penelope.

I write to you in good health, my dear I have been having a quite the week, however, I will not plague you with the details as I fear your heart or indeed your stomach may not be able to take them. However, my dear, what I can tell you is that today is a big night for the Lounge, for it is the Biannual Bat Bunker party. I do not believe I have told you the full story behind this party and *that will be a story for another letter, but simply my dear, some years ago there was an incident that lead to certain events, that lead to a great number of my associates to take refuge in my lounge, and since then it has become so what of a tradition for a rather long party to take place here twice a year.*

The party is to be quite the spectacle and I do believe you would enjoy yourself, but I would not be much of a father if I allowed you to attend such a thing with the calibre of characters that indent to come. But any money is good money if you understand the price. Speaking of, Edward Nygma will be stopping by at some point before the party, I have mentioned him to you before, and as much as he can annoy me I can't help but enjoy our conversations, for it is one of the rare times that I've learned discord is actually of value, though I could do without more of his foible, idiosyncrasies.

As Oswald wrote at his desk, the door opened silently and a man walked in and slowly made his way to the desk, the man than sat on Oswald's desk and crossed his legs like he was a femme fatale from a noir film.

‘Oswald, how are you, you old bird, you.’

‘Edward, you better have a very good reason for disturbing me. Who let you in here?’

‘You're working under the assumption that I would ask.’

‘Good point, but you also know my tolerances for your antics only goes so far.’

‘True, but since I'm still alive, safe to say I have not irritated you too much your *lordship,’* ‘Sarcasm is beneath you Edward.’

‘To hell it is, it’s one of my best survival instincts and I’ll have you know Oswald, the only things beneath me are invalids, the wilfully ignorant and my silk sheets when I lie my weary head to bed for most earnest of rests.’

‘Why don’t you put your vanity to bed for a moment Edward, and tell me, why exactly you have disturbed me.’

Edward clapped his hands together, his leather gloves gathering as he did.

‘Well, Oswald, I have come bearing gifts, for our little shindig tonight,’

Edward pulled out a note from his pocket.

‘Here,’

‘What is this, Edward,’

‘A list of inventories, from all of our *friends*, the supplies and donations they will be making this evening.’

‘Well thank you Edward, but you could have had some else send this up to me.’

‘Oswald, I’m a praise whore and you know it.’

‘Yes, I’m aware of that, but that is no reason to interrupt me.’

‘Oh, come now, I came all the way out here to do you a favour and I’m treated with such hostility.’

‘Edward, my boy, you are very much aware that this is me, not being hostile, but if you would like to see it, then by all means, continue.’

Edward then slid off the desk and adjusted his jacket.

‘Very well, I will prepare myself for tonight's debauchery elsewhere.’

Edward went to the door.

‘Oswald,’

‘Yes, Edward.’

‘In all the years we’ve know one another, I have only seen you use that pen for one propose and yet I have never seen you read a letter in return,’

‘Your point, Edward.’

‘No point, just observation, I just don’t know why you still bother, if she’s never written back.’

‘Get… out… Edward.’

‘Alright, alright, I’m gone, give her my best.’

Oswald threw his glass of port at Edward as the door closed behind him, missing his head and shattering on the door. The wine dripped down the door slowly leaving a trail of red residue, like other red fluids that have dripped down this very door and will no doubt do so again in the near future. Oswald leaned back into his chair and picked up his white and black pen.

Penelope dear, I sometimes envy that you have never meet any of my associates, Edward is one of the most insufferable men I have ever meet, and I have discussed politics with the mayor of

Gotham. Not to say I don't respect the man, in fact Edward's capacity to anger anyone he comes into contact with has never failed to impress me. But charm and showmanship can be mutually exclusive my dear, as I know all too well.

Are you happy where you are dear?

I have found I can be content, but I have also found happiness is not on the cards for me without you here, Penelope.

In any case, I have been keeping myself busy. The list Edward handed me some moments ago will help with tonight's proceedings, you see dear, the list is inventory being put up for auction. Now you must be wondering why this is of any importance, after all you are a clever girl and the Lounge has an auction monthly. This auction is a special one, you see unlike the usual fanfare that comes through here. This list has items that are more exclusive and the most sorted after then any other in the city, such as some of Doctor Crane's Fear Toxin, a rather deadly pair of hydrangeas courtesy of Doctor Isley and Edward has donated one of his masterplans that contain everything from blueprints of the job, to the riddles to leave.

Now my shrewd child, you must be asking why we are doing this, the answer is the reason any of us do anything in Gotham, entertainment, profit, and to cause chaotic shenanigans, but most importantly nothing brings us all together more than trying to one up the Bat and his Birds. You see my dear, these items are sold at these times as to have a level of mutually assured destruction. You see, by having these items you can set someone up at your own discretion, I for one like to know the cards others are holding. But it is mostly used to throw The Batman off the trail. The Batman won't investigate my shipping lists if fear toxin is in the air.

Truly mad, is it not.

Oswald continued to write as there was a knock on his door.

‘What.’

A man slowly moved his head into the room leaving the rest of his body outside. He was trying his hardest not to look at red liquid that was at his feet, as he wanted to maintain some level of ignorance in his line of work.

‘Mr Cobblepot.’

The man paused and waited; Oswald tapped his pen down hard on the table making the man in the frame flinch.

‘Yes, well, spit it out lad, I don’t have all day.’

The man’s voice jumped as he found the words.

‘Mr Wayne is here, sir.’

Oswald slowly put down his pen, he lifted himself out of his chair and moved behind it to push it into the desk. Mr. Wayne did not often frequent the Lounge, but when he did it, was a sign of fortune; if it was good or bad was up to Mr. Wayne’s mood, but what can you expect from a man who could buy up all the city if the whim ever hit him. Mr. Wayne and his horde of children were almost as annoying as the Batman and his Birds. Oswald made his way downstairs to the main floor where Mr. Wayne was leaning on the bar talking to one of the female bartenders.

‘Mr. Wayne, to what to I owe the pleasure.’

‘Cobblepot, I have come to see you about tonight’s auction.’

‘Mr. Wayne, I fear the guest list is full for this evening.’

‘I’m sure you can make an exception.’

‘Now, Mr. Wayne, I am sure that you are used to that being the case, but I am afraid I am going to have to use an unfamiliar phrase to you, *No*.’

‘Well now I have to be there. Is there anything I can do to change your mind?’

‘I assure you, there is nothing you could say or do to change my mind, Mr. Wayne.’

‘Nothing?’

‘Nothing, you would be willing to do, Mr. Wayne.’

‘Such as?’

Oswald paused before slowly letting out a coy smile.

‘As amusing as your antics are Mr. Wayne, I am going to have to ask you to leave, as I am preparing for tonight’s festivities. So, I bid you adieu and if you wish to join next month’s auction then you are most welcome, provided you make the proper arrangements.’

For the first time since the younger man came in, he dropped his smirk as though a mask had trickled away, but the man put it back as quickly as it went, making Oswald question if he saw anything at all.

‘Yes, of course, then I will be seeing you Cobblepot.’

‘Yes, a good evening to you Mr. Wayne,’

Oswald waved three men over to them,

‘Will you gentlemen escort Mr. Wayne off the premises.’

As the two of men walked Mr. Wayne out of the club, he held on of them back.

‘Make sure he stays out, the last thing I need tonight is Gotham’s golden boy finding something he shouldn’t, I don’t want the hassle of killing him. The body disposal alone would be a logistical nightmare.’

Oswald then set the man after them, Oswald made his way to the centre of the room and put his hands on the railing to look at the icy mountain that floated in the frozen water. The lounge was being set up for the auction, people moving around him as quickly as possible, as Oswald stood still looking at the ice mountain that was swaying in the water. The ice was towering and the cold from it could be felt all throughout the lounge. Oswald looked harder at the chilling structure; he saw a small steady stream of water was trickling down the ice. Oswald’s mind floated elsewhere, thinking how something with such presences and intimidating high could be melting away slowly and unnoticed by all around it.

‘As much as I have always liked this glorified monument to your ego, it’s always come off a little more …. Subzero, then was intended don’t you think?’

Oswald jumped, snapping his head around, and snarled.

‘Edward, I swear. If you ever do that again I will throw you into the water and I will make sure everyone here watches you, as you’re drowning.’

Edward gently twirled the green drink in his hand and took a light sip, he then leaned his back on the railing and faced Oswald. Edward lingered on Oswald, his face void of any hostility, silently staring at Oswald waiting for a reply but Oswald just turns his head back to the ice in front of him, his hands gripping the railing tighter.

‘Rough day, Oswald.’

‘It’s going to be a long night.’

‘Oswald this is Gotham, every night is a long night.’

‘Edward, leave me be.’

‘Heavy is the head that wears the crown, are you looking upon your kingdom and weeping, old friend.’

Edward took a long slow sip of his drink.

‘Oh, how very apropos of you Edward, and what is it exactly that I have to weep about.’

‘Oh, who knows, Oswald, you have never once been satisfied with anything.’

‘Perhaps not.’

‘Oh, perhaps, perhaps, is that what you are going with, ok I’ll play, Oswald you have more money, territory and respect then you have ever had, and yet here you are gazing like Gatsby. So, riddle me this Oswald, a turn of phrase, to be sage and yet mindless, what is at its lowest when it’s on top, and how can less be learned and more be dim-witted?’

‘Edward, I don’t, I can’t, do this today, I have not the strength nor the temperament.’

‘My, my, Oswald, I dare say we are dangerously close to having a heart to heart.’

‘Please Edward, don’t insult me.’

‘Yes, you’re right, we would actually have to have hearts for that.’

‘My boy, you have no idea how badly I wish that to be true.’

‘Tut-tut, we can’t let the other degenerates know such unsightly things about us.’

‘Yes, I suppose it would be quite a blow to the reputation.’

‘Indeed.’

Edward took one last sip of his drink.

‘…Have you figured it out yet?’

‘Edward.’

‘Alright, fine I’ll drop it…. for now.’

Oswald loosened his grip on the railing and looked at Edward.

‘My boy, I believe there is still work to be done.’

‘Indeed.’

Night fell and crowds grew as the auction came closer. Item after item was moved into the lounge, the air was filled with cigarette smoke, gunpowder and opportunity. The items were counted by a heavily motivated Mr. Wesker as Mr. Scarface watched him from a nearby shelf. The auction could now get under way, Oswald was by no means a showman that was one of Edward’s games, but he was at times diplomatically inclined. Oswald went to the stage and tapped the microphone.

‘Good evening, ladies, gentlemen and twisted creations of the night,’

Oswald raised his glass gesturing to Killer Croc and Man-bat.

‘Right, now, we all know the rules, but for those of us who need to be reminded.’

He turned his gaze to Harley Quinn, who was at the bar drinking three different cocktails through three curly straws all at once.

‘One item per customer, so choose wisely. You may inspect the product, but it cannot be opened in the Lounge. And most importantly this a silent auction, so do not go around boasting and giving away tonight’s secrets, so in short keep your mouths shut.’

Oswald looked over to the side of the stage where Edward was standing. Edward then put his hand over his chest like a Victorian woman who just saw something unseelie.

‘Now ladies and gentlemen and others, to tie you over while the auction is underway, I give Edward Nygma,’

The crowd collectively groaned.

‘Now, now, I promise this is only his musical stylings.’

The crowd mumbled in agreement, as Edward walked on stage.

‘Oh, gee, thank you everyone, for that dazzling display of comradery.’

‘Sing, Nygma or get off.’

Growled Harvey,

‘Wooo, Eddie. Take it off.’

Harley cheered.

‘Give 'em the hook.’

Yelled Crane.

‘I am going to ignore that Johnathan. Now without further ado, Duke Ellington’s *“It Don't Mean a Thing.”* Hit it boys.’

The band started to play. The patrons started to put their names in for items, Harvey pulled himself from one side of the room to the other, well it seems Harvey and Harv were having a disagreement on what to buy as his ashy left hand kept slapping is right whenever he tried to write anything down though oddly enough there was no coin in sight. Jonathan was sitting off to the side letting his slender frame trail up the wall, his head down letting his glasses slide down his nose. As laughter and small talk flooded the room. A loud crash came from the roof, when the Batman comes knocking it’s never on the door.

Now what is that old saying about glass ceilings.

The Batman came bursting through the roof, the patrons scattered to the wind like glass being through onto the concrete. The Batman grabbed Jervis by the back of his collar and Edward was still on the stage.

‘Well now, we have a Bat in our belfry.’

As Batman pushed Two-Face down, still holding on to Jervis, Two-Face pushed Batman onto the bar counter.

‘Oh, yoo-hoo Bats.’

Harley had grabbed poured alcohol all over the bar and lit it on fire.

‘Oh, and it is getting a little hot in here for the dark knight.’

Edward said calling into the microphone. A glass bottle flow in his direction and he ducked to avoid it.

‘Shut up, Ed.’

‘Make me Crane.’

‘Fine.’

Jonathan yelled as he throws another glass. Oswald then runs on stage pulling the microphone out of Edwards hands.

‘Enough! All of you, Enough.’

The room settled under Oswald’s voice, Batman still holding onto Jervis.

‘Now, I dare say Batman, that you have made it abundantly clear, that you want something or rather someone form here this evening. Yes?’

The room was silent, flames still burning on the counter dancing on top of the alcohol.

‘Yes. Now, why don’t you take Mr. Tetch and leave post haste, before I change my mind and burn this place down along with everyone in it, myself!’

The last words died in is throat from the screaming. Batman looked around the room he took a moment and then silently started dragged Jervis by the scruff of his neck, taking him out of the club as Jervis begged and pleaded to everyone in the room as he was struggling but all of them were still looking at Oswald on stage none of them moving.

Oswald then screamed at the room again.

‘Get out! Auction over, out now, all of you, out. Be gone, go back to whatever place has the misfortune of having you as a resident.’

Not ones to out their welcome, the room began to clear. Oswald headed back to his office, he shut the blinds and sat in darkness, he pulled out his pen once again.

Well my dear, today had just about everything, thrills, spills and arson. Not that I am ever sure what these nights will ever bring. I am only ever sure of what that they will never bring, and that is you, Penelope.

I have done monstrous things my dear, I have robbed, killed and betrayed many men. I have seen vigilantes rise and the old ways of Gotham fall. I have built all that I am on the bones and ashes of other men and yet the only regret I have is, and always will be that I never got to see you grow. That for all my transgressions and all the immoral measures I have taken in my life, the blood that was spilled for all of it, was yours. Even though I have buried the ones who are responsible and entombed them so deep into the earth that their own souls can't find a way out.

But the emptiness I feel in your absence is one I cannot fill, no matter how much luxury, power or control I obtain.

Truly, Penelope, my love, my sweet Penny, there is only one thing that could appease that void and that would be for me to hold you in my arms again and to tell you that,

The door swung open.

'Well that was a disaster.'

'Get out, Edward'

'It's a big mess out there, and you through a fit on that stage, mind you that's not unordinary behaviour for you or any of us. But there seemed to be a little more to it this time as compared to your usual screaming fits of rage.'

‘Edward, I swear, if you don’t leave right now, I’ll.’

‘Kill me? Please Oswald, empty threats are unbecoming.’

Oswald the reached into his coat and pulled out a gun.

‘Are you sure about that.’

Edward flicked up his hands with a light flourish and spoke dryly.

‘Oh, no, I have been bamboozled, please sir, leave me with my shillings and silk robes.’

Oswald cocked the gun back.

‘Edward, out, now.’

Edward leered at Oswald with his hands lowering to his sides.

‘You really mean it this time, don’t you?’

Edward said steadily.

‘What gave it away, dear boy.’

‘Oswald whatever is happening, you need to keep a level head, lest it be chopped off.’

‘Edward, I am going to tell you one, last, time, get, out.’

‘Oswald,’

Oswald’s hand was starting to shake rattling the gun. Edward then slowly moved to go out the door and looked out to club’s centre piece.

‘Our love for the dead, like a floating iceberg, can only be measured by the depths of our resentments.’

‘Rosario Ferre.’

‘Rosario Ferre. Just something to think about, Good night Oswald.’

When Edward closed the door, Oswald still held the gun in his shaking hands. After a few shuddered minutes Oswald placed on the table. He picked up the pen once again.

Penny, my dear child, you were taken from me to soon, you shined so brightly you could block out the sun. and even now after all these years I think of you always.

And perhaps Edward has made a point, though he has done so in a way that made me want to shoot him. My love for you has fuelled my fury, my culpability and solidified my wrath over these long years without you. So even in death you are my hidden strength. Sleep well my child and know that I have not forgotten you. For you are forever a part of me and as long as I am etched into the walls of this city, where my name is held in respect and the city’s life blood flows through me, you will live in its bones with me,

until my bones rest next to yours.

Happy Birthday my dear, With all my love,

Your father.

Oswald then put the letter in an envelope and signed it, he closed it and went into the ballroom, it was empty, a mess and small ambers still danced on the bar counter. Oswald made his way slowly to the iceberg, he moved around the ice mountain until he reached a platform that lead out and was attached to the iceberg, Oswald walked onto the platform until his noise felt the frost from the monument. Oswald then placed his hands on the ice, moving down to a small block that had been carved out and he removed it and then he put the block at his feet, the hole in front to him was no bigger than a sheet of paper. Oswald then held the letter in his hands. Moments stretched out into hours in Oswald’s mind, he then reached out and put the letter into the hole, it landed onto a pile of older frozen, frosted over and twisted together letters. The frozen graveyard has received another body. Oswald them puts the block back into place, he then adjusts his coat and walks off the platform.

For the morning is upon him and light is on its way, so it is time for Gotham to lay itself to rest. As everything worth doing in Gotham is done in the darkness and hidden below the surface.

Life Below

By HybridEqualist

Everything was quiet through the sewers except for a steady dripping and the skittering of rats. One of the little rodents sniffed at the air before crawling to the edge of the flowing river of murky water. Delicately, it leaned down and lightly lapped at the filthy liquid.

Water sprayed and the rat squealed in panic as a clawed hand snatched it from the sewage. It's fearful sounds were abruptly cut short as razor-sharp teeth crunched through the delicate skeleton.

Waylon carefully cracked open the body of his newest snack, tugging out the tiny bones and nibbling the meat off them. It didn't do much to fill his stomach, but the occasional crunch gave his powerful jaws something to gnaw on. When he finished, he left the remains on the concrete and a neat little pile—a marker for himself and a potential lure for more rats to investigate.

Sighing heavily, Waylon sunk back into the water and lazily started drifting the way he'd come. The stench of sewage was overpowering, even while partially submerged, but the familiarity of the smell helped keep it part of the background. If one thing in Gotham refused to change, it was the garbage. There was probably something poetic about that...or ironic...or something; he'd never been the best at figuring that sorta stuff.

His relaxed swim was abruptly interrupted by a series of splashes along the edge of the water. Waylon jolted to his full height without thinking, zeroing in on the motion. He recognized the source of the disturbance a moment later: a rotting rope with floating debris tied to it, now drifting lazily on the filthy river.

The signal.

Waylon immediately began to swim in earnest, submerging himself completely and rocketing through the water. He didn't need to see beyond dodging the assorted flotsam--he knew where he was going; this was an almost daily trip, after all.

When he came out of the water, he did his best to not splash everywhere as he tended to when he was in a hurry. He didn't want to get anyone drenched by accident.

"Howdy Croc," a raspy voice greeted him. The owner of said voice was a heavily bearded man known only as Rich.

“Hey,” Waylon grunted in return, stepping up onto the concrete and blinking in surprise.

The little hobo camp nestled in one of the few dry corners of the sewer was unusually busy: people bustling around, rearranging blankets and bags and carefully relocating the old barrels where they lit their fires.

“What’s goin’ on?” he asked. “Cop raid?”

“Nah,” Rich chuckled. “Newcomer. And a first-timer at that.That’s them there.”

Rich pointed at a wide-eyed teenager, silently stood against the wall and clutching a worn pillowcase, probably full of their belongings. Their eyes locked onto Waylon and the blood immediately drained from their face as they tried to shrink back against the concrete. Rich clicked his tongue.

“Hey, junior!” he called. “Come say hello to Croc!”

The teen clutched at the pillowcase in their hands and stepped forward, visibly trembling. Waylon extended his hand, curled into a loose fist.

“Hey kid,” he muttered, keeping his voice as non-threatening and not-growly as possible. “Name’s Waylon. Everyone calls me Croc.”

The teen stared blankly at the extended fist, shrinking away some when Waylon tilted his head.

“Come on, he doesn’t bite,” Rich said with a smirk. “He only looks like he might swallow you whole.”

“My mouth doesn’t open that big,” Waylon protested lightly, dropping his hand from the failed fist-bump attempt. “And I prefer chilli anyway.”

Rich gave a dramatic sigh and waved the teen away before taking a seat at the water’s edge.

“We’re having a welcome party later. Figured you’d wanna pitch in and grab some stew once we’ve got it nice and ready.”

Rich pulled a flask and took a swig before offering it up.

“How big of a donation you thinkin’ for this?” Waylon remarked casually, taking the flask and taking a sip of the unknown liquid. It varied day to day what he would find and today seemed to be some kind of alcohol mixed with juice. Not the worst combination, but enough to dissuade any further drinking.

“Oh, a nice fifty or so should be enough to cover the food and fuel,” Rich mused, stroking his beard. “But to get the kid settled...and to add some more buffer in case of emergencies now that there’s a new body in the community...well, that would be a couple hundred at least. No pressure if you can’t nab that much, but you know how much it helps.”

Waylon passed back the flask, wiping at his mouth to remove some of the sour taste.

“How long before the party gets into full swing?” he asked, scratching at a water droplet that had settled for too long between the “scales” on his neck.

“Sundown. Or as close as we can get without an actual sun to watch set,” Rich joked, taking another swallow of his concoction. “We got some runners out to grab supplies. If we’re lucky, everyone can have full bellies tonight--even you, big guy.”

Waylon chuckled to himself quietly, knowing Rich was trying to keep the mood light despite the reminder of the community’s current food situation.

“Guess I better get a move on,” he grunted, stretching his arms. “Wouldn’t want to be late when there’s world-famous stew gonna be ready.”

Rich laughed, the echoes mingling with the splashes as Waylon waded back into the stinking water and rocketed away. He swiftly navigated the dark, murky surroundings back to his section of the sewers--a nastier corner of the underground that Rich and the other homeless called his “nest”.

Waylon erupted from the water and hauled himself back up onto the concrete, snatching a semi-dry towel from its makeshift wire rack and vigorously rubbing it over his bare chest and sopping pants. When he remained only somewhat damp, he returned the dripping towel to its place and took hold of one of the many garbage bags sitting beside his wobbly cot. Yanking it open, he grabbed an oversized hoodie bearing the logo of Gotham State University. After confirming it didn’t smell too much like the sewer, he pulled it over his head, doing his best to ignore the way the cheap cotton caught and rubbed against his rough skin, making him itch. He also pulled out a small face mask--the kind some people wore in the winter instead of scarves--and tucked it into the hoodie’s front pocket.

Now dressed in slightly cleaner clothes, Waylon started his walk towards a safe manhole exit, not risking getting the hoodie wet and having the smell attract even more attention than his size already might.

The metal handholds embedded in the concrete walls signalled that he'd arrived. Careful to not dislodge them, Waylon climbed up and pushed against the loose manhole cover, squinting at the shaft of afternoon light that cut through the cracked opening.

After a quick scan of the area to ensure no witnesses would see his exit, Waylon pushed up the cover and slipped out from the sewers. He carefully replaced the manhole so it didn't look too disturbed and quickly pulled up both his hood and face mask, concealing most of his features. Sufficiently covered, Waylon stepped to the edge of the alley and smoothly joined the flow of pedestrians on the sidewalk.

Acquiring "donations" to feed himself and the sewer's homeless community was a fairly regular practice--an almost weekly ritual when there weren't any big schemes he could get a cut of. Picking the right target was always the most difficult part: rich folks grabbed a taxi or had a driver to pick them up from their outings most of the time, so he probably wasn't going to nab one of them unless he got very lucky.

As he moved through the crowd without a word, he scanned everyone who passed, checking wrists and shoes first before getting a full look over them and deciding if they were worth pulling aside. One of the downsides of downtown Gotham--or perhaps an upside since it meant that potential "donators" had more cash on them--was that most people who couldn't afford to lose their money kept their guard up, paying attention to their surroundings. What Walon needed was someone who was distracted, someone who wasn't too concerned…

Someone who, for instance, was staring at their phone and idling next to an open alleyway with a nice watch on his wrist and freshly-polished shoes shining under the cuff of clearly tailored suit pants.

The man was hardly able to protest as Waylon snatched him by the collar and hauled him into the alley, pinning him against the filthy brick.

"Money, watch, now," Walon growled, keeping his voice low to avoid being overheard.

"Don't you know who I am?!" the man hissed, trying to force the grip on his shirt to release. "I'll have you arrested!"

"Heard it all before. Now give me your wallet."

"No!"

Waylon twisted the fabric in his hand, lifting the man off the sidewalk with one arm. With his free hand, he pulled down his face mask, baring his razor teeth. His victim's face immediately paled upon recognizing that he'd just refused the horrible Killer Croc.

"You might wanna rethink that answer," Waylon remarked. "Unless you wanna show up on the news tomorrow."

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The typical darkness of the sewers was disrupted by the brightness of several barrel fires. A cluster of fifteen or so people moved through the small party area, most of them carrying mugs or small makeshift bowls. Waylon stepped out of the murky water, shaking himself somewhat dry and thanking god or whoever was out there for the creation of plastic baggies.

"Hey, Croc is here!" someone called. There was an immediate stir as more familiar voices among the homeless began to call out greetings.

"I brought some cash," Waylon announced to rising cheers. He passed the damp baggie to one of the crowd, who ran off to deliver it to Rich. "We got chilli ready yet? I'm starved."

His goods delivered, Waylon was eagerly accepted into the celebration. At least, as much as the community was comfortable with. He was hastily given free access to all the chilli and was able to sit in the group, but he couldn't help but continuously notice how everyone gave him quite a lot of personal space and kept the conversation mostly about the daily odd jobs and other goings-on that happened when they travelled to the surface. Even when he got to join in on the jokes and have a chuckle, it still felt distant, like the party was happening on the other side of the sewage river.

It was after his third helping of chilli that Waylon finally ducked out, cleaning out his bowl and setting it next to the main pot. He silently trudged to the water's edge and slipped in, ignoring a wad of sopping paper that brushed his shoulder.

The reflections of firelight slowly faded as he glided away, not looking back. He remained silent as he drifted, hardly doing anything to propel himself forward until the current began to pick up. As the sewer water began to rush, Waylon could faintly see light coming through a jagged, broken grate. He paddled back to the edge of the concrete and settled with his legs dangling in the water. Through the rusted metal, he could see the edge of Gotham harbor with its ships, the smell of heavily polluted water rising to meet his nostrils. Just beyond that, if he strained his neck forward, he was just able to see the edge of the moon peeking through the overcast sky.

The wind gusted into the sewer, chilling Waylon's bare, scaly chest. Aside from the noise of water, air and the occasional traffic on the water, the night was still.

This was the only time and place where Gotham really felt peaceful and where Waylon could just be alone with his thoughts. No people chattering, no one watching for any sign he might snap and hurt somebody, no obnoxious "safety bubble" people refused to enter. Even with his rough skin catching on his jeans whenever he shifted, he could almost convince himself that he was just another person looking up at the sky.

Waylon prayed the bat-signal stayed off tonight. He didn't want to go back into the darkness, back into the stinking underbelly of the city. He just wanted to be here with the moon tonight. After all, the moon didn't care who he was, what he looked like or what he'd done to survive Gotham's streets.

A siren passed overhead and he instinctively tensed until the sound faded beyond his hearing. Waylon inhaled a massive lungful of disgusting harbor air, not caring that the smog left a faint bitter taste on the back of his tongue. He carefully laid himself on the concrete, shivering when some more wind brushed over his slowly drying body.

The gap in the clouds widened and Waylon could see the silver crescent's full shape. It's like the sky was smiling at him, happy to be seen by the whole city. If only he could do the same.

The beginning of Kiteman

By Wizardwiz

A fog descends upon Gotham city, transforming the skyline into a sea of grey with notes of orange lights. Nights like this any citizens would stay at home, their doors bolted. The only thing that was able to breach the ocean of fog were the many skyscrapers that populated the city. These tall and imposing towers loomed over the rest of Gotham, contrasted by the dark reddish of the night sky. Upon one of these buildings a tiny speck, stands on the edge, his feet curled over the side and a massive kite strapped to his back.

“Phew, okay you got this! Just stick to the plan”

He said to himself with gritted teeth, as the cold winter night bashed his face in.
This was Charles Brown, though he preferred that people called him by his middle name, Chuck. However, you may know him better as Kiteman!

And on that Cold winter night he was going to pull off the best crime that this stinking city had ever seen. Well at least one of the top 10. He was going to make sure people knew the name Kiteman!

All he had to do was swoop down and grab the jewels being deposited into Gotham’s Bank, and then use the updraft to get him out of there. It was the perfect plan, he said to himself. Sure, it sounded pretty simple and kind of plain, but he didn’t have the budget to get fancy. That’s why he was robbing the bank after all. Besides, all the best plans are the simplest ones.

However, there was one snag that he didn’t account for. Kiteman’s eyes slowly drift down at the fog that engulfed the streets below. Now, it was supposed to be a clear night, but once again it seems that the weatherman had lied his ass off.

Now fog was the perfect cover for unspeakable crimes, but flying a man-sized kite to swoop up a tray full of diamonds was not one of them. In fact, there was a very high chance that the morning newspapers would report of a mysterious large blood stain appealing on Gotham’s National Bank. A cold shiver shoots up his back as the image of dark red enters his mind.

“Fuck!”

He said quietly as he stepped back from the ledge, away from the ominous fog. Kiteman sat down (with some difficulty due to the kite on his back) and checked his watch. It was 23:30, three minutes before the armored car showed up to make its delivery. A heavy sigh left his mouth. He could accept defeat, go home and warm up that stale pizza he had in the fridge or he could risk it and die a nobody.

The damp wet roof soaked into his suit, chilling him a bit. Why did life always have to do him like this? Do him dirty. Like he wouldn’t be up on this stupid roof, trying to steal jewels so he can pay next month’s rent, if things hadn’t gotten bad. Why did those fuckers at the bank make cuts! He gave them 5 years of his life working behind that stupid counter, getting guns pointed at him every other day, and he never complained.

And why the heck did some jerk ward take the name *Killer Moth*! Fuck he had to throw out that sick-ass moth kite. He had put so much work into that thing, it had glowing red eyes and everything. That wonderful kite put him into debt. So much so that now he couldn't even pay for his shitty, cold, rotten apartment.

And why the fuck did it have to be so fucking foggy!!!

With his head throbbing with failure he stood up and stomped around the roof, flipping off god every so often. In that moment with the weight of the world baring down on him, Chuck did the only thing he could.

He picked up a brick and threw it into the fog for some pointless revenge.

"FUCK OFF FOG!!"

Kiteman yelled, as the brick disappeared into the cloudy void below. This petty act of revenge did not do anything to relieve his stress induced headache. It was then he heard a loud skid and crash. He looked over the ledge, but again he couldn't see anything because of the fog.

He tried to lean over, when suddenly his watch alarm started. Three minutes had already passed, he had wasted three minutes bitching. In that moment of indecision, a massive gust of wind caught the back of his kite. It was not long before Kiteman had flipped over the edge.

Cold air rushed past his ears, the overpowering sound filled his head. His kite went wildly out of control as he hurtled down through the murky fog. Fear and panic absorbed him, he wanted to scream, but no sound would leave his mouth.

The fog was so dense that there were moments where he was unable to tell top from bottom. Kiteman desperately tried to grab the kite's handle, fumbling to try and take back control. Fortunately, he took hold just as he passed through the fog layer, with Gotham's streets staring back up at him.

Instinctively Kiteman pulled up just in time to save himself. Triumph, glee filled his chest. He had beaten death and gravity! He was the King of Aviation! Nothing else mattered now because he was alive! He just needed to let the whole world know!

"HELLL YEAAA- "

Was what he nearly shouted right before he crashed face first into a large metal trash can.
Luckily the three-week-old rotten pizza cushioned most of his fall. God bless this disgusting city. It was then after he had removed the pizza crust from his ear canal, he heard the sound of crackling flames. Looking down the street he could see a red blaze and black smoke pouring out of the bank. The armored car had completely wrecked into the front entrance of the bank. Dollar notes were

scattered across the street. Kiteman pulled himself up from his trash pile and quickly limped over to get a closer look, and to also scoop up some notes before they burnt to ash.

At this point Kiteman had simplified his plan to its bare essentials, pick up as much cash as his shallow pockets could carry. It was not an elegant or masterful plan. In fact, it was pretty slapdash and dumb. But after nearly dying, the only thing that was going through Kiteman's head was how much he could scrounge up to buy himself some pain medication.

It was just then, as he was thinking about wrapping himself up in a warm snuggy, that he noticed a colorfully dressed figure hanging out of the door of the armored car. The figure was faced down on the pavement, with a bloody brick nearby. It soon dawned on Kiteman that it was a fuckin clown. And there was only one fuckin clown themed villain in this city that Kiteman knew about.

"Is that the joker?!? Ooh shit fuck!! This is bad! This is really bad!!!"

He said under his breath to himself as he nervously looked around to see any there were any eyewitnesses. But holy fuck he thought to himself… it couldn't have been the brick, right? He looked over at the armored car which had a brick shaped hole right through the windscreen. Yeah it was the brick.

He wanted to rob a bank not off one of Gotham's most famous crime villains! That wasn't going to pay for his rent!! However, it would make a name for himself. Not every day you can claim to have killed the joker. Kiteman bent down to check for a pulse, by taking a closer look he soon realized that this clown didn't really dress like the joker. For one the Joker didn't wear a giant target on his back. Kiteman turned over the dead clown, and indeed it was not the joker. He rummaged through the clown's back pockets and pulled out a wallet.

"Property of Bull's Eye… who the fuck is Bull's Eye?"

Well who ever this clown was, he won't be needing his credit card. It seemed that this clown had the same idea about robbing the bank as he did. Kiteman knew this because gripped in one of the clown's hands was a comically large sack with the dollar sign painted in green. Kiteman gave a small tired smile. At least he wasn't going to go home empty handed.

The fire was increasing in heat and would soon cover the whole car. Kiteman also heard sirens in the distance. Kiteman cracked open the cold dead hands of the clown and grabbed the money sack, he also made sure to take any loose change from their wallet.

And with that Kiteman ran limping into the night. A giant sack of money in one hand and giant lame ass fuckin kite under his arm. The cash would just about cover his rent and medical bills. The Gotham post ran a headline titled: Joker look-a-like murdered! Brickbat Strikes again?

Condiment-plation

By H.T.Vitols

Gotham was home to some of the most menacing and hostile villains in the whole world. There was the clown prince of crime with his schemes and sick sense of humour, the fear of Gotham with his toxins and elixirs, the calculating cat that always hits her marks, the eco terrorist with a deadly kiss and a man with a frozen heart and body. These people have made their names through fear, dexterity and their own brand of a repugnant trademarks. Each of them as cruel as they were unusual, Gotham was always at its finest went it was covered in darkness.

Then there's the Condiment King, Mitchell Mayo, the scourge of Gotham's fast food chain's if for no other reason that he steals all their ketchup and mustard packets and containers. His is as ludicrous as his name indicated and just as pathetic. He was Gotham's biggest shame and from the city that is home to the Joker that is saying something. For it was not his deeds that made Gothamites collective decide to forget and ignore his existents but rather an idiosyncratic sense of pride that they could not quiet name or ever care to admit to having. Though their city was filled with freaks and maniacs, they were at least competent freaks and maniacs. The Gotham rogues stood for something, even if what that was can change, sometimes literally at the flip of a coin. They all made sense, in a Gotham sort of way, they had their deadly jokes, they wanted to see fear on Gotham's face or simply wanted you to answer their riddles and play their games. These were people to be feared and to not be messed with, their names infamous throughout the world, all of them so uniquely Gotham. They gave Gotham a global spotlight and a reputation that cannot be matched. No matter how many alien's Metropolis has or how many captain themed thieves Central City has, they cannot compete with Gotham's flare. But if one is comparing flames a garbage fire tends to burn brighter and hotter than wood and paper. But the Condiment King was one particular garbage fire no one wanted to admit lived in Gotham. Condiment King was less the fire and more the garbage if we are to continue with this allegory.

This leaves Condiment King with an unusual advantage over the notorious criminals in Gotham, no one ever saw him coming or saw him as a threat. Hence, the average Gothamite is easy to take from, for they are so bewildered by his get up and motif that Condiment King can take their wallets, cover then in the condiment combination of his choice and get three blocks away before they even process what has happened. This is no easy feat as the average Gothamite is used to mass hysteria and city wide panic as if it was a minor inconvenience, having something that can shock them is not only rare but jarring like being ready to catch a ball but instead you get thrown a fish, harmful no, but perplexing in the most fundamental of ways.

However, the obvious downside to this is that Condiment King gets no respect, or recognition by anyone. But that was something he was going to change, tonight. He had it all planned out, robbing a bank here, causing mass panic there, then he could do it, bring out the Batman and kill him where he stands. This, this is what will get him respect and recognition he thinks he deserved.

The trap was set at the bank, he went in overnight and placed mustard bombs and before you start to think Michell had any sense of perceptive malice then I regret to inform you that the bombs are not made with mustard gas but the bombs were filled with household yellow American spicy mustard. He placed a device in every vent and hidden in all the pot plants. He has also poured maple syrup all over the floor it was so thick you could only take a few steps before becoming stuck to your ankles. After Batman was stuck to the floor and the mustard went off covering Batman, he would fire his relish gun (with a well-timed pun) and fill the dark knights mouth with it, then he would finishes him off with he would drop four industrial sized ketchup barrels onto his head crushing him to the sticky floor as he drowned in the relish.

It was perfect. No longer will he be a joke, who could laugh at him then, no one in this city or any other, his name will be known throughout the world more than any other rogues has ever been before. Then on one will wilfully ignore him ever again because history will remember him as the man who killed Batman.

Everything was set, he had his hostages and his plan now all he needed was the Batman. With a sudden burst through the widow there he was. The Batman, wait no, that wasn't Batman, it was a child in a red and green suit. Where is Batman? And where are this boy's pants?

'Wow, really, Condiment King, how are you holding these people here?'

'With this.'

He pulled out a gun and faced it to the boy. The boy then throws a knife, a god damn knife, at Mitchells' hand making him drop the gun. This is the robin he has been hearing so much about he thought they were just rumouring that Batman had a kid. Oh well, the boy will have to do for now he is Batman's bird after all.

'Well little boy you have made a big mistake, you won't *relish* coming here.'

He then fires his weapon at the boy as he cartwheels to the side.

'Dude not only was that lame, but it makes no sense. Try and *ketchup*'

The boy then flipped over the syrup trap with a duck and tumble jump, how did he flip over five metres of the floor with barley a run up. The boy then swiped his feet from under him as his back firmly planted into the syrup. He was stuck like a turtle on its back, the boy giggled and leaned down to him.

‘Hey, why didn’t you rob the place when you set all this up?’

‘I wanted the Bat.’

‘And I wanted to meet Superman tonight, but I guess both of are plans got ruined.’

Then boy then waved to the room of now free hostages had them put down some tables so they could walk over the sticky floor and flipped over the syrup again, he was just rubbing it in now. The boy then held open the door for the hostages and then the police as they came in, the boy then vanished into the night.

The cops were laughing and taking pictures and Condiment King struggled on his back. He then gave up and contemplated how his life came to this.

Place of Sentiment

by Hiilovetrash

From the very moment he had laid his eyes on her, Victor had been absolutely smitten. How her pale skin glowed in the sun, how her blonde hair flowed in the slight breeze. Her eyes, a piercing blue, so clear, so bright. So very full of light and love for the world around her. A radiant maiden she had been, sweet Nora. And her *mind*.

Her smarts and her ideas, they left Victor simply flabbergasted. From the first time he had spoken to her, he clung to her every word like a vice. For the first time in his life, he had finally come across someone who shared his philosophies, someone who saw the world through his eyes.

Finally, he wasn't alone.

University had been a dull place until he had met her. The tedious lectures had proved to be less difficult in her presence, and how she made the hallways she walked through light up. Victor often stared at her in delight as he saw the hall liven up the moment she set her foot in it.

Every moment in her presence he cherished as it would be his last, as if by some miracle she'd disappear in the night, like a dream he had woken up from too soon. The way she smiled at him made him feel like he was on cloud nine and her laugh could brighten his darkest days.

It was hard for Victor to not fall for her. And fall he did, hard and fast. He was head over heels before he realized it had happened. He was captivated beyond belief, and there was nothing he could do exempt let himself fall deeper and deeper with each and every conversation they had, with each and every look they shared.

He was hers from the moment he saw her in the busy halls of the university, whether Nora realized it or not. Victor could only hope she'd be his, but only time would tell.

-

“Yes! I’d love to!”

Victor could swear that he had never felt happier in his life. The woman he adored with every inch of his being had just agreed to go on a date with him, and Victor was ecstatic. His heart was racing and he could swear his face was slightly flushed. It was an innocent proposition, a simple coffee date after lectures, yet to Victor, it felt like something otherworldly. Something so unreal, far too good to be true even.

And yet she agreed.

His stomach had twisted from the mere idea of existing in her presence, but a date? Oh, he was on cloud nine, barely breathing from the adrenaline rushing through his veins as she smiled at him. To Victor, this was more than enough. Knowing that that one smile was meant for him and him only, well, it made his damn year, to say the least.

Victor never saw it going further than that one coffee date. He didn’t dare hope that she’d want to spend more time with him, didn’t dare imagine that she’d want to be his, lest he breaks his own heart.

And yet, despite everything, they started dating that exact evening.

-

They’ve been together for about a month now, and Victor could swear that he had never been happier in his life. All the laughter she had strung from him, all the joy she brought into his grey world, it had all seemed surreal. He had never thought he could feel so overwhelmed with happiness, yet here he was, smiling like an idiot as they shared their coffee at that same coffee shop they visited but a month ago on their first date.

As he reminisced about the past month, he noticed how different he and she were. Her with her cheery, pale eyes, so unlike his dull, dark ones. It was the little things, from how she liked her coffee extra sweet, to how neat and tidy she was with anything, and even to how she went to sleep at a reasonable time and got her 8 hours of sleep. They were worlds apart, and yet Victor had never in his life found someone so similar to himself.

They could talk for hours on end, always finding new things to discuss, always trying to understand each other more. The more they understood, the more they fell for one another. And though he would never admit it to anyone but her, with each smile she gave him, he became more desperately entranced by her.

And desperately entranced must have been the look on his face cause Nora just giggled at him and reached out to squeeze the hand with which he absent-mindedly tapped on the table. Her hand felt like heaven on his, her every touch sent a shiver down his spine, it almost set his very soul ablaze. He had been so scared to hold her hand at first, that if he touched her she would fade away. She was so sacred to him, he was afraid that his touch would somehow hurt her. That it would chase her away.

The first time they properly hugged felt like something so magnificent, and he almost didn't want to let go. Their first kiss left him on the edge of passing out due to the fact that he was utterly breathless the moment their lips first met. Hell, he wouldn't be lying if he said that the only heaven he ever knew he found in her blue eyes and soft, gentle hands.

And as he leaned forwards and placed a feather-light kiss on her lips, he realized it was the only heaven he ever needed.

-

It had been almost five years now. Five years of Nora being with him. Five years of his utter devotion to her. Almost half a decade since she decided to grace his life with her presence. Victor had gotten the job he wanted, and altho the people he worked for weren't the best lot there was, it paid the bills, and more importantly, got Victor enough money to get the love of his life a special gift.

It had been the same spot for the past five years now, that same old coffee shop where they had first confessed to one another. It was a place of sentiment to them both. Victor saw it fitting to take her there this time around too.

She hadn't suspected a thing. Victor got both of their orders, a tall black coffee for him and a flat white with extra sugar for Nora. They talked like they always, about work, about philosophies, about that one cute cat Nora saw the other day whilst she was walking home. Nora mentioned that she was very close to reaching a breakthrough in her research, and Victor tried to sound as excited as one could when being eaten away by the fear of rejection. He tried his best to not let the overwhelming anxiety show, but even with his best efforts, Nora noticed.

Of course she did, she knew him inside out. She knew when something bothered Victor, she always knew. She was the only person Victor let know. It took some time, but little by little she stripped his walls, saw him for the man he truly was. She had called him a wonder quite a few times, and Victor cherished every time as it would be the last time he heard it.

He could barely hold eye contact as she asked him if something was wrong. Her gaze seemed too piercing at the time, and he felt her eyes looking into his soul, searching for even a hint of what made Victor feel so on edge. He barely kept his composure, barely breathed. He didn’t move a muscle for what seemed like an eternity.

He tried to get words out, failing a few times, his voice simply not producing a sound. His effort was enough to tell Nora that something was up. How easily she read him, kind of like one would read a book they’ve read twice before.

He pondered if he should just come out with it, say what he was feeling, what he was hoping for, dreaming of. He dreamt of her being his, finally being just his. As selfish as it was. He was so utterly smitten with this woman he adored and he wanted nothing more than to be just hers in return.

He didn’t know where he’d begin, all the time he spent practicing his lines in the mirror suddenly left his brain, and he had nothing but the feelings of his heart to guide him. And yet, maybe even that was enough. Even if he could never say that he did enough for Nora in return for all she did for him.

He was far from perfect, not nearly as perfect as she was in his eyes. He would forever say she deserved better, yet she never seemed to think twice when it came to her affections. He wanted this to be perfect, she deserved something perfect such as herself. And yet his mind was rushing, pacing, thoughts running around his head, and he couldn’t find the right words.

Were there *“right”* words to begin with?

Everything be damned, he was doing this. He slowly got out of his chair, and the confusion that painted itself upon Nora’s face made him that much more anxious as he knelt down in front of her. He looked her in the eyes, and looked as if he’d never see those beautiful orbs again. The emotions in her pearly blues went from confusion to shock to joy as they stared at each other for a few passing moments.

The words came more naturally than he expected, and even though it wasn’t as perfect as he hoped it would be, Nora seemed to smile just a bit wider with each word that left his mouth. He poured his heart and soul into every word, his entire being filled with nothing but adoration for the love of his life.

Apparently, this was enough for Nora. Victor could say whatever he wanted, but there wasn’t one time Nora didn’t see something as enough. She took what she got and called it perfect. Yet Victor always felt she deserved more. He wanted to give her more. So he kept going, his words a never-ending stream of affection, and he could see her tearing up.

At one point, he wasn’t sure when, she jumped into his arms, and clung as she’d never let him go. He didn’t want her to let go. If she could just hold onto him forever, it would be more than enough for him. He realized he’d been stalling. No, stalling wouldn’t be the right word. He was spilling all his feelings of admiration to her, and that would never be stalling, that would never be a waste of time. Making his dear feel loved would never be stalling in his eyes.

When re ran out of words to say, he barely had enough air in his lungs to ask for her hand. To ask her to be forever his, as he was forever hers. Nora had kissed him breathless, her hands reaching to cup his face, happy tears spilling from her eyes. When they pulled away, she pressed their foreheads together, and repeated the word “yes” a few times before she kissed him again.

Neither realized the small crowd which was now watching them, joyful smiles on their faces as they watched Victor and Nora embrace each other. He managed the strength to let go of her for only a moment, so he could give her the ring. He slipped it on her finger, and hugged her tightly yet again. The ring itself fit like a charm, and Victor couldn’t help but feel relief wash over him as he let himself relax in her embrace. There was a strong happiness in his chest, yet there was so much more.

What he was feeling, he couldn’t put it into words if he tried. Their orders were on the house that night.

-

Victor snapped awake, breathing heavily. It would be another restless night it seems. She would want him to sleep. He had a big heist to pull off tomorrow, and his sweet Nora had always insisted that one shouldn't work when not properly rested. Rest seemed like such a trivial thing since she had fallen ill.
Since Victor had to place her in that god damned machine. Since he had to freeze the love of his life to keep her alive.

It had been 10 years since he had last heard her voice, since he had last felt her hand on his. If tomorrow went well, he'd be one step closer to getting her back. He had made sure everything would be perfect.
That the heist would go just as planned. And yet, standing in front of his beloved, the heist was the last thing on his mind.

He still dreamt of her. Of them. Of being happy in her arms. Of planning their future together. The dreams left him with a certain sense of longing, where all he could do was in front of the frozen casket his dear Nora laid in and hope that her sickness would go away. Pray that this was all a nightmare, that if he sat there long enough he'd wake up and she'd be okay.

So he sat there for what seemed like a century, before the sun peeking through the windows of the lair forced him to deal with the harsh reality. If he wanted her back, he'd have to fight tooth and nail for it. And so he would. If it was an overgrown bat and his little bird companion he'd have to cross to get Nora back, lord as his witness he would.

The heist was in 9 hours. There were preparations to be done.

Victor could daydream about his love all day, but Mr.Freeze had a job to do.

-

It was just a simple bag he needed to grab. It had enough chemicals for him to make a cure for his love, and everything would be okay again. Every single step was carefully calculated, from his arrival to the free window of time he'd get before the Bat and his sidekick inevitably arrived.

He had a few goons as hired help, all well paid in advance. The alarms in the building were shut off, there was nothing that could go wrong. Victor almost smiled thinking about it, but now was no time for that.

It was about ¾ into the plan that everything went to hell and Victor was left with no choice but to fight the Knight himself. He merely dodged a batarang that flew right past his face. He guessed it was time for plan
B. Only problem was, plan B consisted of whatever he could think at that very moment. And in all honesty, it had been a while since he had frozen a group of selfish businessmen.

The ice blast from his freeze gun had trapped the poor fools within seconds. This would prove as enough of a distraction for the Dark Knight and the Boy Wonder, or at least he hoped.

He had more important things to take care of. It was time to get what he came for in the first place. It was right there, the bag of chemicals was right there he just needed to take it. It was his last hope for now, a chance like this wouldn't come anytime soon, he needed to take it and he needed to take it *now*.

He checked the contents of the bag, already feeling victorious. He'd get her back, he'd get his Nora back, then all of this would be over. He almost felt giddy.

The happiness was short-lived.

The stupid kid crashed down on his back with such a force that caused him to drop the bag. The bag fell down onto the floor with a loud crash, chemicals of different colors spilling out, reacting with one another, thankfully not causing anything to explode yet.

Victor was enraged. He hit the little brat over the head with his gun, and proceeded to freeze his legs with a lighter version of the ice blast which he had used on the businessman. Not enough to kill, but enough to ensure the boy wouldn't be going anywhere any time soon.

Even in his anger-fueled state, he couldn't kill a child. This child who may as well have taken his wife from him yet again. This little brat that hasn’t done anything but ruin his plans time and time again. He would have killed anyone else for this. Yet he couldn’t kill a child.

So he did the next smartest thing, and started heading back. Back to his hideout. Back to Nora.

-

On his way back, most of Gotham got frozen. Through all the ice it became impossible to tell where he was at any given moment. Tracking him was no use.

Victor was getting ready to freeze yet another street, when he noticed where he was. On any normal day he would have known the moment he stepped in the street what street it was, but today it took seeing that one special place to realize Nora wouldn't approve if he froze this particular street.

Instead, he lowered his gun, and for the first time in what seemed like ages, he walked into the coffee shop alone.

-

He remembered when Nora had first fallen ill. He wouldn't let her move around too much, let alone leave the house. Which is why Nora wished for the specific coffee she had always drank at the coffee shop, Victor would have to suffer going alone.

The first time he had gone to the coffee shop alone almost crushed him. He wasn't used to Nora not being by his side. It got easier to do with time, but it still stung. Almost like a constant reminder that his wife was now a prisoner of her own body, that she probably wouldn't live much longer if Victor didn't find a cure fast enough.

The thought of losing her terrified him. Going there alone made it seem like he had already lost the fight. He hated going alone. But, as long as Nora was happy, he would live. She was in so much pain already, who was Victor to deny her the small joys in life.

The day before he froze her was the last time he visited that coffee shop.

-

There was an all too familiar jingle of the door bell as he walked inside, the workers looking at him, sheer terror in their eyes. He could smell the warmth of the place, it reminded him so much of her. Of all the good times they had together. The old gramophone sat in the corner of the shop, still spinning the same records it had spun in their youth.

An old, melancholic feeling settled in his chest. He calmly walked to the counter. The workers were frozen in place, they didn't dare breathe. Victor took a deep breath, and ordered one tall black coffee and one flat white with extra sugar for takeaway. Though confused, the workers didn't waste a moment and scurried to make the coffees as quickly as possible.

Victor took the two coffees and headed back to his Nora. His beautiful, wonderful Nora. The feeling of dread filled his chest as he realized he failed her once again. He failed his perfect angel yet again. He prayed that one day, when she did wake up, she'd forgive him. Forgive him for taking so long. For being so lost without her there.

He sat in front of the machine yet again, placing his wife's coffee in front of her. Hoping, praying that she'd understand. That he was sorry. That he really did try. That he still loved her.

He knew she couldn't hear him or see him, and for that he was almost glad. That she didn't have to see him broken like this. He looked at the coffees in front of him, and his eyes accidentally trailed up to look at the ring, ever present on her hand.

He recalled that night, all those years ago.

He recalled the feeling once again. So distant and foreign in his cold heart. What he was feeling, he couldn’t put it into words if he tried.

And he'd be lying if he said he could now.

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THANKS FOR READING

-AGZ MODS♥